Traditional Christian and Mormon views of God and their compatibility with the moral theistic argument: An exercise in ramified natural theology

by

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"I declare that *Traditional Christian and Mormon views of God and their compatibility with the moral theistic argument: An exercise in ramified natural theology* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references".

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Signature

Loren D. Pankratz

Abstract

In a 2013 article in *Philosophia Christi*, David Baggett and Ronnie Campbell argued that the moral argument for God's existence can bolster the case for uniquely Christian points of theology. In this spirit, Francis Beckwith authored a chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge* (2002) in which he argued that the Mormon worldview does not adequately ground moral laws. In 2006, LDS philosopher Blake Ostler published a monograph in which he offered a response to Beckwith's argument and attempted to demonstrate LDS theism's compatibility with objective moral values and duties. A substantial portion of Ostler's work argues for a reinterpretation of Joseph Smith's teaching about God that he dubs "kingship monotheism". Christian scholars have yet to respond to Ostler's critique of Beckwith's argument or his grounding of objective moral values and duties within an LDS worldview. This paper represents a beginning of such a response. It argues that the moral argument for God's existence provides good evidence for Christian theism and also serves as a defeater for LDS theism as well as Ostler's LDS "kingship monotheism".

Key terms

Metaphysics, naturalism, natural theology, objective morality, ontology, ramified natural theology, traditional Christian theism, divine command theory, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the moral argument for God's existence, monarchotheism.

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Abbreviations

AJTP	*American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*
APQ	*American Philosophical Quarterly*
BYUSt	*BYU Studies*
CJT	*Canadian Journal of Theology*
FarRev	*FARMS Review of Books*
IE	*Improvement Era*
IJPR	*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*
Interp	*Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*
JAP	*Journal of Applied Philosophy*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JOD	*Journal of Discourses*
JR	*Journal of Religion*
JRE	*Journal of Religious Ethics*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
PhilChr	*Philosophia Christi*
PhilSt	*Philosophical Studies*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries

Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The project of natural theology seeks to offer knowledge about God that can be publicly observed or that is the product of reason (Menuge and Taliaferro 2013:233).[1] This project is of considerable value to Christian theists who hope to convince those who lack a belief in the supernatural to come to know God. A theist's appeal to revelatory literature in demonstrating God's existence or saving grace may not carry persuasive force for the atheist, since the atheist does not believe there is a God who is responsible for that literature. However, the atheist ought not deny what reason demands or what natural facts betray. Thus, over time, natural theologians have developed philosophical arguments, apart from scripture, aimed at proving God's existence and/or attributes. Arguments of this sort include Anselm of Canterbury's ontological argument, Thomas Aquinas' five ways, and William Paley's teleological argument, as well as more recent arguments from the fine-tuning of the cosmos, consciousness, reason, and objective morality.

Philosophers and theologians may employ natural theology to discriminate between religious outlooks. This way of using natural theology has been called ramified natural theology. Thus employed, natural theology becomes useful in arguing for not merely theism, but for a particular brand of theism.

Theistic religions differ regarding what they hold to be true and real about God. The metaphysics of the divine that has developed in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) differs considerably from the metaphysics of the divine in traditional Christian theism. This research project is an application of ramified natural theology, attempting to answer the question, "Which religion, LDS or traditional Christian theism, is more likely to be true based on the results

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[1] The author recognizes that to some extent the project of natural theology goes beyond this traditional scope to include reasoning aimed at integrating faith and reason. In this sense, natural theology is not something done prior to faith, but something faithful people do to integrate their faith, art, science, and understanding of history. This understanding is articulated by the Gifford Lectures, http://www.giffordlectures.org/overview/natural-theology (accessed 10/7/20).

of natural theology?" Specifically, this research will look closely at the evidence for God produced by the moral argument for God's existence.

The moral argument, if successful, provides strong evidence for a deity who is the grounding source of objective moral values and duties. This research project's goal is to ascertain whether the deity to which the moral argument points is more at home in either traditional Christian or LDS theology. If Christian theism and LDS theism pair equally well with the moral argument for God's existence, then the argument provides evidence for both forms of theism. If, however, Christian theism has the metaphysical resources in its concept of the divine to appropriate the moral argument and LDS theology does not, then the moral argument for God's existence would be a good argument for the existence of the God of Christian theism and, at the same time, a significant argument against LDS theism. Equally, if the nature of the divine in LDS theology accommodates the attributes of God that the moral argument would recommend to reason while the God of traditional Christian theism did not, this would, in turn, be a powerful argument for LDS theism and against the God of traditional Christianity.

1.2 Definition of key terms and concepts

The key terms used in this dissertation are: metaphysics, naturalism, natural theology, objective morality, ontology, ramified natural theology, traditional Christian theism, divine command theory, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, traditional LDS theism, neo-orthodox, and monarchotheism. Definitions of these key terms are found below.

1.2.1 Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the philosophical study of reality (Evans 2002:74). It is the title given to what Aristotle called "first philosophy". The subject matter of "first philosophy" for Aristotle was "being as such" (van Inwagen and Sullivan 2017). In the seventeenth century the field was expanded beyond simple "being" and now includes the study of causal relations among beings, modes of being, and

being in relation to time and space. As employed in this work, metaphysics will be used to describe kinds and qualities of beings entailed by a worldview (Moreland and Craig 2003:173). For example, the metaphysics of a materialist will differ markedly from the metaphysics of a theist. The worldview of the materialist will admit only material beings to exist, while the theist is open to immaterial beings. Thus, we could say the metaphysical commitments between theists and atheists differ in that the materialist does not believe any immaterial beings exist, while the Christian theist is committed to the existence of immaterial realities including angels, demons, souls, God, and the heavenly realm inhabited by such beings. Furthermore, a traditional Christian worldview may differ from other religious metaphysical perspectives. The traditional Christian worldview includes a monotheistic vision of the divine, whereas some religious worldviews are not metaphysically limited to one deity. Indeed, the nature of God often differs in various religious worldviews, and this difference could be characterized as a distinctive metaphysical view of reality as it pertains to God.

1.2.2 Naturalism

While various definitions of naturalism have been offered, naturalism may be thought of as a "cluster of positions and a set of philosophical commitments" that affirm: 1) an epistemic acceptance of either strong or weak scientism, 2) a causal story of all that exists in terms of the atomic theory of matter and evolutionary biology, or 3) a general ontology in which the only beings allowed are those that "bear a relevant similarity to those thought to characterize a completed form of physics" (Craig and Moreland 2000:xi). Alvin Plantinga describes naturalism as a "quasi-religion" because it answers the basic worldview questions one's religion typically answers (Plantinga 2011:311). Naturalism affirms that there is no God and no afterlife, and that significant human freedom may be illusory. This work will interact with several naturalistic accounts of objective moral values and duties.

1.2.3 Natural theology

Natural theology is the branch of philosophy that argues for God's existence or attributes independent of divine self-revelation (Menuge and Taliaferro 2013:233). More specifically, natural theology appeals to one's natural cognitive resources rather than the resources of authoritative, propositional revelation in establishing truths about God (Topham 2010:59; Craig and Moreland 2012:ix). Typical natural theological arguments for God's existence include the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the argument from design, and the moral argument.

1.2.4 Objective morality

Objective morality refers to morality that transcends human subjectivity. Objective morality theory holds that there are moral facts and that human moral judgments are true or false in relation to these facts (Copp 2005:40). When a person affirms objective moral values, that person is conveying information about the inherent value of other persons or acts by describing properties of those persons or acts (Moreland and Craig 2003:400). Objective morality points to a real moral truth beyond mere descriptions of human well-being or psychology.

Ethical naturalism is a "reductionist view that holds that ethical terms can be defined by or reduced to natural, scientific properties that are biological, psychological, sociological or physical in nature" (Moreland and Craig 2003:401). This view does not seem to support the existence of objective morality. Most Christian theists argue instead for some form of ethical non-naturalism in which irreducible moral facts and properties exist as part of the "furniture of the universe". Christian theism has traditionally held that God is the grounding for moral truths. He has moral properties such as goodness, and it is in virtue of his making persons in his image that humans come to have worth and dignity and that some acts are right or wrong (p. 402). In this work, objective morality will be affirmed and ethical naturalism will be critiqued as part of the moral argument for God's existence.

1.2.5 Ontology

Ontology is a sub-branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being or existence. One of the major tasks of the ontologist is classifying things or beings according to their properties and relations (Moreland and Craig 2003:175–176). This categorical analysis among practitioners of different worldviews reveals that differing worldviews may have a differing ontology. That is, the ontologies entailed by different worldviews may differ about what sorts of things or beings there are. An atheist's ontology, for example, does not include God as an existing being, whereas theism does include God in its ontology.

1.2.6 Ramified natural theology

Recently, philosopher Richard Swinburne gave the name "ramified" natural theology to that sub-discipline of natural theology that seeks to move beyond a generic (bare) theism and toward a specific deity without the aid of divine revelation (Swinburne 2004:533).[2] Angus Menuge and Charles Taliaferro have noted that not all theistic religions explain the findings of natural theology equally well (Menuge and Taliaferro 2013:233). The ramified natural theologian uses the properties and attributes of deity entailed by natural theological arguments to discriminate between competing religious metaphysical outlooks. The discipline of ramified natural theology can be thought to be a "natural extension of 'bare' natural theology, which takes us from a generic theism to a particular religious claim" (Baggett and Campbell 2013:337).

1.2.7 Traditional Christian theism

In this project, traditional Christian theism will refer to Christian doctrine that has united various branches of Christianity since its inception. Included in this sort of "mere Christianity" are the following beliefs: that the Old and New

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[2] An exception to this rule is work in this field that takes as its subject the Bible itself. This work may still qualify as natural theology if it does not assume the revelatory status of the Bible, but rather seeks to use publicly available evidence to demonstrate the revelatory status of the Bible, thus providing natural theological evidence for the God of the Bible (Newman, Bloom and Gauch 2003). See also Gauch 2011.

Testaments are uniquely God's special revelation to humans in written form, that there is and always has existed only one God who is the maker and creator of everything that began to exist, that God has eternally existed as Father, Son, and Spirit, and that salvation gracefully comes through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ crucified. As the creator of all that began to exist, God exists in all possible worlds, and thus, is a necessary being.

1.2.8 Divine command theory

Divine command theory (DCT) is an ethical theory which understands human moral duties as obligations we have to God in light of his moral commands (Moreland and Craig 2003:531). On this theory, God's moral commands constitute the grounding for the objective moral duties for which humans are responsible. God's commands, which are not independent of God but dependent on his nature and character, ensure human moral duties are both objective and not arbitrary.

1.2.9 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) was founded in 1830 in North America. Joseph Smith Jr., its founder, purported to have received a series of visions which eventually led him in the discovery and purported translation of the Book of Mormon. Smith did not claim to translate the book in a traditional manner in which a person, fluent in multiple languages, transfers the content of a work from one language to another. Rather, Smith claimed to translate the book by the "gift and power of God". Smith claimed that the entire Christian faith apostatized after Jesus and the Apostles were killed, and that God would use him as the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator to restore true Christianity. After the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon, Smith went on to publish several other books that are considered scripture to the LDS faithful.

After Smith's death in 1844, Brigham Young took the mantle of leadership, rising to be the religion's second prophet. He led the LDS faithful to the Great Salt Lake Valley, establishing Salt Lake City as the LDS Church's headquarters (Davies 2006:125). Presently, in 2020, the LDS Church is led by

the seventeenth President and Prophet Russell M. Nelson. The traditional beliefs of this church can be accessed through the publications of its Apostles and Prophets, publications produced by the LDS Church, speeches given by LDS authorities during the church's biannual General Conference, and information released on the LDS Church's website.

1.2.10 Traditional LDS theism

The doctrine of divinity espoused by Joseph Smith Jr. was understood by those who followed him to entail that God himself had not always been God, but rather, that he progressed to that position through obedience to the gospel in a process in which each human male is currently engaged (Givens 2015:103). Humans who follow God's lead and obey the gospel will progress to be "as intelligent and as omnipotent as God, Himself" (Richards 1944:10). In this view, God, like humans more generally, has eternally existed as an uncreated, self-existing entity known by LDS thinkers as an "intelligence" (Roberts 1906). God, at some point in the past, transitioned from this state to that of a spiritual personage and has progressed to attain the status of divinity as other spirit beings have done before him (Roberts 1888). God became exalted to divinity "through obedience to the same eternal Gospel truths that we are given opportunity today to obey" (Hunter 1945:104).

1.2.11 Neo-orthodox

It is important that we distinguish the LDS neo-orthodox movement from the neo-orthodox movement within Christianity led by Karl Barth. This research does not include Barth's ideas within its scope. When referring to the neo-orthodox movement, this research will be referring to the LDS neo-orthodox movement which, beginning in the late 1960s (Mosser 202:77), emphasized different aspects of God and salvation than traditional LDS theism. Neo-orthodox theologians tended to emphasize the "otherness" of God and the contingency of humankind (White 1970:89). The neo-orthodox movement tends to emphasize the individual's inability to merit salvation and the necessity of salvation by

grace; this emphasis has emerged as a hallmark of neo-orthodox thought. Brigham Young University professor Robert Millet believes this emphasis is the result of at least three factors: 1) The 1970s saw an emphasis on reading and studying the Bible which resulted in a "re-awakening" to biblical theology. 2) In the 1980s and 1990s, thirteenth President and Prophet Ezra Taft Benson encouraged a discovery of the redemptive theology within the Book of Mormon by asking the LDS Church to study the Book of Mormon in a systematic way. 3) Church authorities Neil Maxwell and Bruce Hafen began to speak of grace not as a "final boost", but as an enabling power that enabled one to accomplish what one could not accomplish on his or her own (Millet 2011b; Pankratz 2012:117–18). In this work, neo-orthodox thinking will be contrasted with both kingship monotheism and traditional LDS thought.

1.2.12 Monarchotheism

Blake Ostler claims that "until recently almost all Mormons believed that Joseph Smith taught that God progressed to become fully divine from a lower state of non-divinity" (Ostler 2008:17). This belief stems primarily from Joseph Smith's King Follett sermon (April 7, 1844) and his Sermon on the Grove (June 16, 1844). Ostler, however, believes that a close look at various reports from eyewitnesses of those sermons supports a different view. For example, Ostler finds Thomas Bullock's report to support the view that "there is a head God who organizes a council that consists of other head Gods to plan the creation of the world" (Ostler 2008:20). Ostler calls this metaphysical arrangement in which a supreme God presides over a council of subordinate gods "kingship monotheism", or "monarchotheism" (Ostler 2006:91).

Ostler's view of deity differs markedly from the traditional LDS perspective of divinity. While the LDS perspective allows for God to have once been a non-divine being who progressed to full divinity, Ostler's "kingship monotheism" holds that God has no beginning and did not progress to his divine status, though he "condescended for a time to become a mortal in the same manner as Christ" (Ostler 2006:435). While traditional LDS teaching regards God as being without beginning in the weak sense of his eternally existing as an uncreated

intelligence, but being divine only after a mortal sojourn, Ostler's view holds God to be eternally God, fully divine and without beginning (p. 437).

1.3 Motivation for this research

This researcher's experiences as a pastor, experiences as a philosopher, and experiences in previous research projects have played a role in the project's inception. These experiences are described in more detail in what follows.

1.3.1 Personal experiences as a pastor

Over a decade ago, I responded to a call in my life to full-time ministry. I have sought to allow God to direct my work throughout that time. In 2010, God opened a door for my family and me to move to Utah to plant an evangelical church in an area where less than 1% of the population attends an evangelical Christian church on Sunday mornings. Prior to becoming involved in ministry to Utahns, I would not say I had a "heart to reach Mormons" as some missionaries might say. I saw this area as incredibly under-served by the church and found that I was uniquely gifted and able to make a difference in that area. As an experienced associate pastor, I saw planting a church in an area with little to no salt and light as an exciting way to live out the great commission. Since beginning ministry in a Utah context, I have worked hard to develop ways to engage LDS people of all types with the hope of the gospel. This project, if warranted by it's results, may enable me to offer more conclusive reasons to intellectually-minded LDS members for rejecting core claims of LDS theism while also giving a sound reason to accept traditional Christian theism.

1.3.2 Personal experiences as a philosopher

Having earned my B.A. in philosophy, I have maintained fluidity and competency in the field by immersion in philosophy journals, by attending and participating in philosophical conferences, and by completing a doctoral degree under J.P. Moreland at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology in the

"engaging minds and culture" program in 2012. In 2013, the editors of *Philosophia Christi* developed a special issue of the journal centred on ramified natural theology. This issue challenged me to think along some new lines, and I began to contemplate the degree to which differences in beliefs between LDS and traditional Christian theism are philosophically relevant. After some thought, I published a paper in *Philosophia Christi* which focused on avenues traditional Christian thinkers have in defence of the problem of evil that are not available to LDS theologians in virtue of their unique beliefs about Jesus (Pankratz 2014). Completing that project sparked in me an interest to identify distinctive teachings of the LDS Church that are philosophically significant. This current project is motivated in part by a desire to ascertain the degree to which natural theology can serve philosophers and theologians as they weigh truth claims of traditional Christian theism and LDS theism.

1.3.3 My experiences as a researcher

I have an affinity for the moral argument; I have spent considerable time learning the argument and have defended it in a public debate at Fresno Pacific University (2008). I have also published a review of philosopher Audry Anton's work related to morality (Pankratz 2016). During the course of my doctoral studies at Biola University's Talbot School of Theology, I engaged in research relating to the LDS Church. Having spent a good deal of time becoming acquainted with the LDS Church and its teachings, I am motivated to continue learning and growing in this direction. My hope is that this research will open new avenues for evangelical and LDS dialogue.

1.4 Problem statement

Both LDS theism and Christian theism claim to be true, and these claims are mutually exclusive. Arguments of natural theology carry with them certain metaphysical commitments. This research seeks to ascertain the extent to which the ramified natural theologian may use the moral argument as evidence for a particular theism, while, at the same time using the argument as evidence

against a competing form of theism. For example, if the moral argument carries with it entailments that can be accounted for in traditional Christian theism but not in LDS theism, then the moral argument would be evidence for Christian theism and, at the same time, evidence against LDS theism.

The moral argument has been used by theists as an argument for theism for almost 800 years[2]. At the same time, very few LDS theologians have utilized the moral argument as an argument for LDS theism. Rex Sears has noted that doctrines peculiar to LDS theism weaken any apparent relation between the Mormon God and the being required by some natural theological arguments for God's existence (Sears 2000:75). Sears finds the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, and some varieties of the moral argument to offer no support to Mormon theism. Indeed, he notes that some forms of the arguments cut against Mormon theism. Francis Beckwith has written in this direction, arguing that the deity of the LDS faith is incapable of being the grounding for objective morality (Beckwith 2002:240). LDS philosopher Blake Ostler has critiqued Beckwith's view and contends that Mormon theism is capable of grounding objective moral values and duties. This research seeks to carry this discussion further by showing that the moral argument is a good argument for theism and may also serve as an argument against LDS theism. Several research objectives will need to be met in order for this research to succeed. The three primary research objectives are described below.

1.5 Research objectives

For this project to succeed, this work must first demonstrate that the moral argument is a good theistic argument. Next, it is necessary to show whether or not that Christian theism is able to accommodate all the metaphysical commitments the moral argument for God's existence requires. Finally, this project will examine that the ontology of deity in the most important forms of LDS theism–traditional LDS theism, the neo-orthodox view of LDS theism, and the

[2] In their history of the moral argument, David Baggett and Jerry Walls credit Thomas Aquinas as the inaugurator of the moral argument (Baggett and Walls 2019:11).

more philosophical form of LDS theism represented by Blake Ostler's monarchotheism–and show whether or not these forms of LDS theism are able to accommodate all the metaphysical commitments the moral argument for God's existence requires.

1.6 Research questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. What, if any, is the most cogent form of the moral argument for God?
2. What metaphysical implications derive from the theistic moral argument in its most cogent form?
3. How do the three types of LDS theism differ in their understanding of the metaphysical nature or attributes of God?
4. Is traditional Christian theism or any of the three types of LDS theism consistent with the metaphysical implications of the moral argument?

1.7 Project overview

The membership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown rapidly over the past decades and so deserves careful attention by Christian theologians and philosophers. While there have been voices of opposition to the LDS Church's distinctive theology in the past, in recent years more scholars are devoting significant attention to the theological and philosophical problems posed by the peculiar teachings of the LDS Church. This new attention has also triggered a surge in LDS apologetics as faithful LDS members seek to defend their faith from critics.

In 2002, Christian philosopher Francis Beckwith authored a chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge* entitled "Moral law, the Mormon universe, and the nature of the right we ought to choose" (Beckwith 2002). In that chapter, he argued that the Mormon worldview does not adequately ground the moral laws that the LDS Church correctly embraces. LDS philosopher Blake Ostler responded to Beckwith's chapter with substantial criticism. Ostler published a monograph in which he devoted a chapter to countering Beckwith's criticisms,

attempting to demonstrate LDS theism's compatibility with objective moral values and duties (Ostler 2006:77–115). Christian scholars have yet to give a full or adequate response to Ostler's critique of Beckwith's argument specifically, or his handling of the grounding of objective moral values and duties within an LDS worldview more generally. This project aims to advance this discussion, seeking to ascertain the degree to which the moral argument may be used by the traditional Christian theist or LDS theologian as evidence for their particular brand of theism, and, at the same time, as evidence against other forms of theism that do not share their metaphysical commitments.

Both LDS and traditional Christian teaching hold that the Bible, in both the Old and New Testament, is a major source of information about God. The theologian wishing to use the moral argument as evidence for a theism associated with the God of the Bible faces several challenges. First, the theologian must address the perennial philosophical problems raised against the moral argument, including the Euthyphro dilemma, the challenge of Platonism, and the problem of evil. Secondly, the theologian must demonstrate that it is possible for the God of the Bible to be the grounding for morality to which the moral argument points. This challenge itself has two focal points. First, biblical theology must show a scriptural basis for God's grounding of moral values. Second, one must show that it is reasonable to suppose that our moral duties flow, in some sense, from God.

This latter problem has been highlighted by several philosophers who deny that the God of the Bible could be the grounding of objective morality because some of the commands he issues seem immoral (Harris 2007:8–19; Armstrong 2009:110–114). If these objectors are correct, the immoral commands of God would constitute a defeater for the belief that the God of the Bible could be the grounding for objective moral values and duties described by the moral argument. Several philosophers and theologians have argued that God, as he is described in Christian Scripture, is a sound grounding for morality and have sought to explain the problematic passages in the Bible highlighted by objectors to the moral argument (Copan 2009, 2011, 2014; Jones 2009).

The ramified natural theologian may wish to press still farther and demonstrate that a particular form of theism is capable of meeting the above challenges while other theistic traditions are found wanting in that regard. When speaking of LDS theology there exists another challenge, stemming from the fact that LDS theology is not monolithic. Francis Beckwith has argued that traditional expressions of LDS theism are philosophically incapable of grounding objective morality (Beckwith 1997:125–126; 2002:219–241). Blake Ostler has given a defence of traditional LDS theology in light of Beckwith's argument while also offering a different interpretation of LDS scripture and teaching that he believes is capable of grounding objective morality. Ostler's view of LDS theism is not mainstream, but it may be more consistent with the metaphysical entailments of this argument from natural theology. For it to be clear that the moral argument counts as evidence for one brand of theism and, at the same time, as a defeater for a different form of theism, the moral argument for God's existence must show that one kind of theism possesses the philosophical and theological resources to answer the demands of the objector to the moral argument while also demonstrating that the other theism is incapable of overcoming these problems.

As highlighted above, the primary philosophical difficulty for the moral argument stems from an argument raised by Plato, known as the Euthyphro dilemma. This is not to say it is the only philosophical challenge. Critics of the moral argument have also denied the existence of objective morals (Ruse 2012:53–74; Rosenberg 2011:94–145) and have argued for some other objective standard apart from God (Harris 2007:23–25; Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:53–89; Craig 2004:32–36). Historically, however, what is known as the Euthyphro dilemma has been the primary argument levied against propagators of the moral argument (Antony 2013:112–114; Arthur 2012:35–45; Dombrowski 2008:205; Levin 1989:25).

The "Euthyphro dilemma" refers to Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, in which Socrates runs into a man named Euthyphro outside of a courtroom. Socrates discovers Euthyphro is there to bring an indictment for a capital offence against his own father. Socrates wonders how Euthyphro could bring such an indictment unless he was sure he would not be doing something against the gods himself

by making such an accusation against his father. Euthyphro claims to have knowledge of what pleases the gods and does not please them, that is, what is pious and impious, and so Socrates begins questioning Euthyphro to tease this knowledge out of him. Eventually, Euthyphro claims that what all the gods love is holy and that what all the gods hate is unholy, to which Socrates asks his famous question, “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods” (Plato 1966:1:10a).

This question presents Euthyphro with a vexing dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is untenable for Euthyphro because it makes holiness independent from the gods. Holiness becomes a property the gods recognize and that does not originate in their will. Assenting to the second horn of the dilemma is tantamount to claiming that holy things are just those things that happen to be loved by the gods. This too is untenable because it seems to make holiness arbitrary. Had the gods loved murder, rape, and torture, then those seemingly heinous acts would have been “holy”.

This dilemma has been the catalyst for a major objection to the moral argument. Adapting the Euthyphro dilemma, one may challenge God as the grounding for objective morals and values by asking, “Does God command/will something because it is morally good, or is something morally good because God commands/wills it?” Arguments against God being the grounding of objective moral values or duties due to Euthyphro-based considerations have been advanced recently by Graham Oppy (2006), Louise Antony (2013), Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2009), and Alex Rosenberg (2011).

Some theists have taken to the task of defending the moral argument from its critics. Some defenders of the moral theistic argument suggest that the Euthyphro is not a true dilemma and argue for a third option rather than choosing one of the two options offered (Copan 2013:93). Others seek to overcome the dilemma by addressing problematic aspects of one of the two horns (Dombroski 2008). Guided will theorists opt for the first horn of the dilemma (Levin 1989; Mouw 1970). These theologians argue that God’s commands are what they are in virtue of God’s choosing to command what is

already good. David Baggett and Jerry Walls have argued that this position locates the authority of morality outside of God. If God is not the final ground of objective moral values and duties, then the moral argument must be considered a failure (Baggett and Walls 2011:33–45).

Those who instead take the second horn are known as "pure will theorists" or "theological voluntarists". This position, embodied most fully by William of Ockham, appears to understand God's commands (and thus morality) to be arbitrary. Robert Adams's (1999) divine command theory (DCT) is a less extreme form of theological voluntarism than Ockham and represents a solid voluntarist option.[3] C. Stephen Evans (2013) has also argued for objective morality in a nuanced version of the DCT that is open to ethical truths that do not depend on the divine will while also being ontologically dependent on him.[4]

A successful appropriation of the moral argument within a theistic context requires a view of God and his relation to morality that can overcome the objections raised by the Euthyphro dilemma while also positing a deity capable of grounding objective morality. It will be important for this research to demonstrate the degree to which both LDS theism and Christian theism have the necessary metaphysical resources to overcome these challenges.

As mentioned above, in addition to the philosophical challenges to the moral argument just discussed, the project of assessing Mormon theism in relation to the moral argument is complicated by the fact that there are different types of Mormon theism. One of Ostler's key contentions is that Beckwith's argument is aimed at a version of Mormon theism to which an LDS theist is not necessarily committed (Ostler 2006:78). Apprehending just what Mormon theology says about God can be difficult because what LDS authorities and

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[3] For Adams, God is the Good itself. Goodness, then, is not an abstract object but a concrete individual (Adams 1999:14). God obligates humans by issuing commands, and Adams holds that God "could have commanded a diversity of principles (p. 256). For Adam's, God's commands obligate humans, but his commands flow from his loving goodness (pp. 258–259; p. 282).

[4] Evans is open to utilizing natural law theory as a mode of discovering what is good for humans (Evans 2013:61). In this way, what is good for humans is dependent on God (who created human nature, including what is good for that nature), but not necessarily communicated in particular commands.

theologians believe about the nature of God appears to have changed over time. Kurt Widmer argues that the LDS Church's emphasis on continuing revelation, as well as other external forces, has resulted in changing views about God (Widmer 2000:3). Widmer contends that early Latter-day Saint theology, as extrapolated from the Book of Mormon, is by and large monotheistic, even if, as Charles Harrell has pointed out, it has much in common with a modalistic interpretation of monotheism (Harrell 2011:111). However, by 1844 the continuing revelation and preaching of Joseph Smith had become henotheistic and often focused on the plurality of gods (Widmer 2000:21). Thomas Alexander notes that doctrinal statements concerning the nature of God that followed Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse began to stress the plurality of gods and the tangibility of his body, rather than the unity between the Father and Son and the Father's spiritual body (Alexander 1980:27). This doctrine of the plurality of gods has been called one of the most distinctive doctrines of Mormonism (Harrell 2011:114).

Exactly what is entailed by this plurality of gods is also difficult to pin down. One difficulty in assessing the ontological commitments of the LDS concept of a plurality of gods is that over time, several versions of Smith's famous "King Follett discourse" have been published. What an LDS theologian believes about the nature and origin of God often depends on which version of the King Follett discourse that person considers to be authentic (Widmer 2000:145).

For the purposes of this research, I will focus on three identifiable versions of Mormon theism, each of which emphasizes a different aspect of Smith's teachings and LDS scripture. I will first examine the traditional LDS doctrine of deity which emphasizes the finiteness and progressive development of God who is subject to laws causally independent of himself (White 1987:65). This view relies on authoritative people, pronouncements, and official publications from the LDS Church. Next, I will turn to what has been labelled the LDS "neo-orthodox" view. This section will highlight the relevant differences in LDS metaphysics represented by this strain of Mormon theism. This view began in the late 1960s and is today most closely associated today with several

prominent professors from Brigham Young University whose publications have been very influential on Mormonism as it is lived out today (Mosser 2002:77). Lastly, I will explore the variety of Mormon theism represented by Ostler that has been dubbed monarchotheism or “kingship monotheism” (Ostler 2008:257). This view denies God ever existed as a non-divine intelligence and instead holds to God’s eternal divine nature and his rule over all other beings. In this view, God did not become mortal to become exalted. This research project will use the natural theological evidence from the moral argument to assess the relative strength of each of these versions of LDS theism against the conception of God espoused in traditional Christian theism.

Several LDS philosophers have noted the difficulty in grounding objective morality in God. Rex Sears (2000:73), an LDS philosopher, has noted that the institutional understanding of the nature of God and humans has led to the moral argument for God’s existence being “virtually absent from the Mormon tradition”. He notes that God, in institutional Mormon thought, cannot be the ultimate source of power or morality because, having once been like us, he must have derived his power from yet another source and must have been subject to some other objective standard of morality (p. 80). Kent Robson, another Mormon philosopher, agrees that moral laws must be “independent of God and to some extent out of God’s control” (1983:21). If moral laws exist independent of God and outside of his creative power, then it is difficult to see how God could be the ultimate grounding for morality.

Kim McCall (1981:27), a Mormon philosopher, has noted that according to the LDS institutional view of God, morality must ultimately be independent of the will and dictates of God. Because, in the institutional LDS worldview, humans are essentially independent of God and ultimately “co-equal” with God, McCall struggles to find a way to bind our will to God’s in a way that would obligate us. McCall notes several ways LDS thinkers have attempted to ground objective morality within God’s will or show humans to be obligated to follow divine dictates but ultimately finds all such prospects insufficient. McCall abandons the cause of grounding objective morality in God and instead supposes that there are universal moral laws that exist independent of God and to which God and humans are subject (p. 31). This view seems to be essentially a restatement of

the thesis of Parley Pratt (one of the original twelve Apostles of the LDS Church) that even the Father and Son are "subject to the laws that govern ... physical existence" (Pratt 1877:37). God, according to another influential LDS authority, does not ground the universal laws present, but merely recognizes them (Widtsoe 1932:175). Terryl Givens (2015:64) has recently shown that this view is not only in harmony with other LDS Church authorities but is also consonant with Mormon scripture. He notes several passages from the Book of Mormon in which God obeys laws to which he is subject.[5]

Even Blake Ostler's kingship monotheism agrees that moral truths are distinct from truths about God (Ostler 2006:81). He states, "Moral law is arbitrary in the sense that it arises from an impersonal universal that is not the product of a mind nor does it arise in the context of interpersonal relations" (p. 84). Ostler proposes what he calls an "agape theory of ethics in alignment with the gospel of Christ" (p. 109). In this theory, Ostler grounds objective moral values and duties not in God, but in "our eternal divine nature" (p. 110). He says, "Each person ought to act so that each shall have the best life possible within the constraints posed by eternal conditions necessary for mutual self-realization" (p. 110). This project will assess this grounding of objective moral values and duties on these various interpretations of LDS theism.

1.8 Outline of the chapters

The goal of this project will be realized over six subsequent chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two will explain and defend the moral argument for God's existence. The third chapter answers several key objections to the moral argument. Chapter four will demonstrate the compatibility of Christian theism with the ontology required by the moral argument. Further, this chapter will develop a working model of the divine command theory. The fifth chapter will draw out several versions of LDS theism. Chapter six will assess the compatibility of the moral argument with varieties of LDS theism. The seventh and final chapter will draw conclusions and point to several applications and new

[5] Givens sites Alma 41:11, 42:13, and Mormon 9:19 as LDS scriptural examples of self-existent principles that underlie the structure of the universe, which exist independently to God and to which God is subject.

directions for research based on this project. What follows is a more detailed outline of what will be discussed in each chapter.

1.8.1 Chapter one: Introduction

Chapter one introduces the topic, describes the motivation for researching the topic and explains the research problem which comprises the context for this study. Further, this chapter exposes the research objectives and research questions that guide this project. Finally, this chapter provides an overview of the project and chapter summaries.

1.8.2 Chapter two: The moral argument

Because this project seeks to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of several different theistic systems of belief in light of the ontology demanded by the moral argument, the goal of this project cannot be accomplished without detailed attention to the particulars of the moral argument for God's existence. With this in mind, chapter two will highlight several ideas that have emerged in the history of philosophy relevant to the moral argument and will conclude with an analysis of modern approaches to the moral argument. Through this analysis we will begin to see the metaphysical commitments that are required in order to appropriate the moral argument as evidence of a theistic worldview.

From the classical period I will examine several pre-Socratic thinkers' visions of morality. Next, I will consider Plato's theory of the good and Augustine's use of God as the basis for virtue. Plato reasoned that particulars have goodness insofar as they exemplify the form of the Good, which is objective and eternal. Augustine argued that moral virtues are dependent on theological virtues, which are oriented toward God and infused by him. Thus, for Augustine, moral virtues are dependent on God.

From the Medieval era, Aquinas's fourth of his "Five Ways" is an argument from value in which Aquinas reasons that because we detect

gradation of value, we must be comparing things to some standard (Kreeft 1990:68). Aquinas presupposes that values are objective, that is, that value judgments are judgments of facts. He argues that some things have greater good than others. Aquinas sees this as one example of gradation which is seen elsewhere in heat and being. This gradation in things points us, Aquinas thinks, to God who is the maximum of all gradation, including moral goodness. Thus, for Aquinas, morality is one place we see gradation, and this gradation points us to God.

In the modern era, Kant's deontological ethics argued for the existence of God as the guarantor of a morality based on practical reason. Kant argued that in order to be moral, one must believe that being moral can bring about a good state of affairs. To believe this, one must also believe that "the causal structure of nature is conducive to the achievement of this end by moral means" (Evans 2014). For Kant, to believe this is equivalent to the belief that there is a being who is responsible for the character of world. Morality, for Kant, requires a realized ideal, and God is guarantor of that ideal (Kreeft 1990:64).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a renewed interest in the moral argument. William Sorley argued that the moral argument shows that theism "offers the most reasonable and unified explanation of reality" (Craig 1994:90). More recent defenders of the moral argument include C.S. Lewis, Paul Copan, Mark Linville, and William Lane Craig. This chapter will compare the ways in which these more recent philosophers make use of the moral argument, highlighting both points of contact and major breaks from the past uses of morality as an argument for God's existence.

This chapter will develop the moral argument in detail, arguing that objective moral values and duties are at home in a traditional Christian theistic worldview and that, without a being like the Christian God, morality would be illusory. Specifically, this chapter will examine William Lane Craig's argument from objective moral values and duties and Mark Linville's recent articulation of the moral argument for God's existence found in the *Blackwell companion to natural theology*.

Craig's argument builds on the thought of William Sorley, who developed a sophisticated version of the moral argument by helping disambiguate the subjective origin of our moral judgments from the objective moral values that we take to ground those judgments (Craig 1994). J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig argue that: 1) if God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist. 2) Objective moral values and duties do exist. 3) Therefore, God exists (Moreland and Craig 2003:495).

Atheists Friedrich Nietzsche, Michael Ruse, and Alex Rosenberg are adamant that objective moral values are illusory, thus affirming premise one while denying premise two. Naturalists Sam Harris (2007, 2010) and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2009) attempt to ground objective morality in that which objectively serves the well-being of sentient life. Thus, these ethical naturalists, while affirming the premise two, deny the first premise. This chapter will assess the claim made by some philosophers that naturalism is compatible with objective morality.

Craig's second premise, that objective moral values and duties exist, is paradoxically the most apparent while perhaps also the most difficult to defend. In order to argue that this premise is more likely than its negation, theists must disarm the claim advanced by Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson (1985) that if evolutionary naturalism is true, then morality is a by-product of natural selection and thus a "shared illusion". Mark Linville takes up that critique in his chapter in *Blackwell companion to natural theology* (Linville 2009:398). Craig also supports this premise by arguing that belief in objective moral values is on par with a belief in the world of physical objects (1994).

In his version of the moral argument, Mark Linville argues that human dignity is the basis for moral reflection, and that "theists can, where naturalists cannot offer a worldview that accommodates the notion of personal dignity" (Linville 2009:392). Paul Copan notes that moral values such as human dignity and worth make more sense on theism than on naturalism. He asks, "Why think value would emerge from valuelessness?" (Copan 2013:86). Linville argues that there are several obstacles in a naturalistic accounting for human dignity, while

for the theist, “the personal and valuable are not emergent features of reality, but rather, are basic” (Linville 2009:443). Stuart Hackett argues that the only successful ground for intrinsic value in human persons is a transcendent personal good. The transcendent good’s self-worth must be inherent in itself, not merely instrumental in relation to some other entity (Hackett 2002:152). Linville concludes that human persons are valuable because God, the transcendent good, values them as creations made in his image as a person with a rational and moral nature (Linville 2009:445). This chapter will conclude by raising several objections to the moral argument that will be taken up in chapter three.

1.8.3 Chapter three: Objections considered

Philosophers have offered objections to the moral argument for God’s existence. The argument can only be thought to be cogent to the degree that it can answer these objections. Chapter three will highlight several important objections to the moral argument. Three major challenges to the moral argument will be considered in this work: the Euthyphro dilemma, the problem of evil, and the challenge of Platonism. The Euthyphro dilemma will be considered in chapter four, and the problem of evil and the challenge of Platonism will be examined in this chapter. The answers to these objections will give further insight into the nature of deity essential to the success of the argument. Below is a brief description of the objections that will be considered in chapter three.

Some philosophers have argued that the Christian God cannot be the deity that grounds the good because of the suffering we find in the world (Mackie 1977; Rowe 1979). The presence of suffering in general, and gratuitous suffering in particular, would seem to point one away from the existence of an all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing God like the God of the Bible. Various theologians and philosophers have responded to this challenge and, while it is beyond the scope of this project to develop a full defence of Christian theism from the problem of evil and suffering, it will be helpful to outline several lines of defence available to the Christian theist to show that the Christian God can both ground the good while allowing for evil and suffering. Alvin Plantinga’s free-will

defence (1978) and Stephen Wykstra's (1984) "sceptical theism" contributions to this endeavour will be discussed.

For William Lane Craig's argument from chapter two to be successful, he must overcome ethical naturalism as well as C. Stephen Layman's (2009) challenge to Craig's second premise. Layman argues that Platonism is able to account for objective moral values apart from God, thus providing a sound foundation for objective moral values in a non-theistic worldview. If objective values and duties can be tied to "the good" as an abstract object, then one need not suppose the existence of a deity to ground objective values and duties. This chapter will argue that a theistic worldview has several virtues that make theism a comprehensive and parsimonious grounding of objective moral values. Baggett and Walls (2011) have argued that Platonism cannot account for meaningful moral freedom, which is a key component of a successful moral theory. The arguments against Platonic realism in Craig's recent nominalist tome (2016) will also be appropriated as evidence for Craig's second premise.

1.8.4 Chapter four: Compatibility with Christian theism

This chapter will assess the claim that Christian theism is compatible with the moral argument for God's existence advanced in chapter two. Biblical data will be examined in order to evaluate the degree to which Christian theism is compatible with the ontological commitments of moral argument. The divine command theory (DCT) will be assessed as a model for how human obligations may be connected to the objective moral grounding of God's nature.

The DCT has a long history and recently, several theistic philosophers have revived interest in divine command ethics. The projects of Robert Adams (1999), Stephen Evans (2010), and Walls and Baggett (2011) represent major works in this resurgence. Adams argues that God is the transcendent Good. He claims goodness in the world is such because it stands in a resemblance relation to God—a faithful imaging of the divine. Adams argues that right and wrong must be understood in relation to a social context, but he includes God in the society to which we owe obligations (Adams 1999:232). Obligations arise only from

personal relationships or out of a social system of relationships, since having an obligation to do something involves being required by another person or group of persons to do it (p. 241). Mitch Stokes supports this thesis by reminding us that obligation requires a mind—someone doing the permitting, forbidding, or requiring—as well as another person who is being permitted, forbidden, or obligated (Stokes 2016:204). Theism grounds moral obligation because God, the standard of the good, has issued commands that obligate us in various ways. DCT theorists have differing ideas about how God makes his commands known, but they agree that "what we are obligated to do or not to do is grounded in God's commands" (Adams 1999:250). The strongest opposition to DCT comes in the form of a dilemma.

The Euthyphro dilemma asks the important question, "Does God will something because it is good, or is something good because God wills it?" This vexing problem appears to leave the theist with two choices, either of which seems to conclude that morals cannot be grounded in God. If God wills something because it is good, then the good would seem to be independent of God, which would entail the failure of the moral argument for God's existence. If something is good because God wills it, then good and evil seem arbitrary. If one takes this horn of the dilemma, and God had willed that hatred was good, then we would be morally obligated to hate one another, which most would admit would rob the moral argument of its cogency. In answering this dilemma, the theist must show that God is the grounding of the good while being such in a non-arbitrary way. Several recent divine command theorists have argued that God's nature grounds the good objectively, and that his will or commands represent morally binding duties. These responses to the Euthyphro will be assessed.

Another argument against a biblically-based Christian theism providing a solid ground for objective morality is the claim that there exist biblical texts which serve as a defeater for belief in the Christian God's capacity of being the ultimate basis for objective values and duties. This argument will be considered in this fourth chapter as well.

1.8.5 Chapter five: LDS theisms

The LDS Church has a strong hierarchical governing system. Many points of doctrine originate and are communicated through the standard works (Book of Mormon, King James Bible, Pearl of Great Price, and the Doctrine and Covenants), official pronouncements from the first presidency, Conference reports originating from talks delivered by LDS Church authorities at General Conference, LDS Church correlated materials (i.e. manuals), and the LDS website (McKeever 2011). With this tight control on doctrinal dissemination, one might think that this culture would create a homogenous belief system among the adherents to the LDS faith. This is not the case. In a number of ways, modern LDS theologians and philosophers have felt free to move away from traditional LDS ways of thinking. In some cases, the lack of an official church pronouncement on a subject has given some LDS thinkers room to craft positions that, while not espousing the traditional LDS viewpoint, are not in direct conflict with any official LDS doctrinal position. Some LDS philosophers and theologians have also felt free to distance themselves from LDS prophets or authorities on positions when they view an alternative position to be in concert with other LDS scripture and are also more philosophically defensible. This move has its roots in the LDS “neo-orthodox” movement that began in the late 1960s (Mosser 2002:77).

In the 1970s, this movement was fed by a renewed emphasis on reading and studying the Bible. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, the movement was further abetted by a call from Prophet Ezra Taft Benson for LDS members to study the Book of Mormon in a systematic way. Brigham Young University professor Robert Millet thinks these scriptural renewal forces of the 1970s through 1990s led some LDS philosophers and theologians to express and articulate their faith in non-traditional ways (Millet 2011b). This has been observed in the way some LDS neo-orthodox theologians have re-interpreted key LDS scriptures like 2 Nephi 25:23 (Pankratz 2012:137) and how other LDS philosophers like Blake Ostler have moved away from the infinite regression implied by the doctrine of deity espoused by earlier LDS authorities. Because of this diversity of doctrinal

understandings about the nature of God, for this project to be successful, it must be clear about which LDS version of God it is comparing to the metaphysical requirements of the moral argument for God's existence. In this chapter, three LDS visions of the divine are evaluated: the traditional LDS view of deity, what is called the "neo-orthodox" position, and the monarchotheist view espoused by Blake Ostler.

The traditional reading of key sermons delivered by Joseph Smith and explanations given on the topic of divinity by succeeding generations can be summed up by fifth Prophet of the LDS Church Lorenzo Snow's famous couplet, "As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be". This couplet serves as a poetic way to say that God himself is an exalted man (*Improvement Era* 1909:81). As Ronald Huggins has shown, this couplet, and the view of deity it entails, continues to live "at the heart and logical center of the whole Mormon religious system" (Huggins 2006:568). This chapter will elaborate on the metaphysical implications that this traditional understanding of God has for the LDS faith.

This chapter will also evaluate the neo-orthodox view. An important question to ask of this viewpoint is, "Does this new emphasis betray a different metaphysics of the divine?" This chapter will answer this question.

The third view to be assessed is Blake Ostler's view, which he claims is consonant with Joseph Smith's view of divinity. This view, which Ostler calls "kingship monotheism", or "monarchotheism", holds that the beginningless or eternal God is the monarch (head God) who rules over subordinate gods. This view is distinct from the traditional view in which God is thought to be one being in an eternal chain of gods. Ostler claims that a detailed look at the key sermons delivered by Joseph Smith supports the view that there is an eternally divine head God who organizes a council of other gods (Ostler 2008:20). In this chapter, Ostler's claim that this viewpoint is consistent with the teachings of Joseph Smith will be evaluated.

1.8.6 Chapter six: Compatibility with LDS theisms

This chapter will seek to discover whether the ontological commitments of deity uncovered by the moral argument for God's existence are compatible with the traditional LDS, the neo-orthodox, or Ostler's view of the divine. Francis Beckwith's argument will be helpful in assessing the traditional LDS view's ability to ground objective morality, and this project will cover new ground by testing Ostler's viewpoint. Further, this section will uncover the degree to which each of these views is able to answer the objections against the moral argument addressed in chapter four.

1.8.7 Chapter seven: Conclusion

This paper will conclude by summarizing and drawing out the implications of the research presented. A successful ramified natural theological argument for a particular form of theism over an against another by way of the moral argument for God's existence must give good reason to believe the soundness of the moral argument generally while also demonstrating the degree to which the various theisms examined are able appropriate the moral argument, given the metaphysical commitments that flow from it. If this project is a successful example of ramified natural theology, it will conclude by showing that the moral argument counts as evidence for one form of theism while also serving as a defeater for the other forms of theism in question. This project will close by offering several ideas for future research in this field of study.

Chapter two: The moral argument

2.1 Introduction to the moral argument

Philosophers have long reasoned about the relationship between morality and divinity. This chapter will first map out a brief history of philosophical thought regarding the connection between the two. The history described will provide context for the moral argument and will help identify the essential ingredients of a satisfactory moral theory. Concluding this chapter, several objections to the moral argument for God's existence will be introduced and will be taken up in the subsequent chapter.

2.2 Moral thought in the classical era

The Ionian author Homer (ca. 700 BC) wrote epic poetry about the gods. Homer's gods interacted with one another and involved themselves in human affairs in various ways, but one primary function of the gods was to punish men for their lack of moderation and their hubris (Stumpf 1966:4). Homer's gods were powerful and thus demanded obedience, though they were also capricious and were themselves subject to fate. Writing around the same time as Homer, Hesiod wrote on the gods and the moral order, but his writings differed in several respects. Hesiod understood the gods to be neither capricious nor subject to fate and saw a moral consistency in their commands that Homer's gods lacked (ibid.). Hesiod believed the commands of the gods to be ordered around the good of humankind rather than the gratification of the gods, though Hesiod saw no justice in the actions of the gods themselves (Reynolds 2009:25). The poetry of Homer and Hesiod explains the human condition in a world where blind fate seems to rule (Baggett 2018:25). Fate appears to be inevitable for many major life events, even if each individual event in one's life is not determined (Nichols 2008:10). In this period, humans who are not in control of the elements seek some semblance of control by living a pious life that the gods reward. The world is chaotic and by pleasing the gods, humans find order. This view of the world was challenged by the early philosophers.

Philosophy was born along the western shores of Ionia in the seaport town of Miletus. There, successful commercial activity gave rise to leisure and exposure to ideas from around the world. Thales gained notoriety by solving seemingly intractable problems, developing new ways to measure height and distance, and predicting an eclipse of the sun in 585 BC. Thales also asked the question that launched the philosophical endeavour: what is the relation of the One and the many (Stumpf 1966:6)? There appear to be many different things in this world, but despite the variation, there is also a basic unity that ties all things together. Thales wondered, “What is fundamentally the same, and what changes?” Thales and the Milesian philosophers who followed him disagreed about what the most fundamental part of reality was, but they agreed that there must be something that underlies the nature of all things. This shift to a belief in an order that underlies reality marked a departure from the epic poetry of Homer and Hesiod, in which the world is fundamentally chaotic.

Later philosophers of the fifth and sixth centuries BC like Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, and Anaxagoras continued the inquiry into the fundamental reality but found the answer not in matter itself, nor in a boundless infinite, but rather in something inherently rational. Pythagoras saw harmony in music and medicine as illustrative of how mathematics imposes limits (forms) on matter and thus shows us what is good. Heraclitus saw behind all the change in the world an organizing reason (*logos*) that guides the process of transformation. Heraclitus called this reasoning force the “One” and “God” (Stumpf 1966:15). It is the One that organizes the many. Xenophanes reasoned that God, as the greatest being, must not be limited in power or by time and space and cannot have an origin. Xenophanes argued that what comes into existence does so either from what is like it, or by what is unlike it, and both alternatives lead to absurdity in the case of God (Kenny 2006:6). Anaxagoras, agreeing with Xenophanes and in line with Heraclitus, understood the nature of reality to be dualistic, with mind (*nous*) as the principle that provides matter with its order, though he believed all matter to be eternal (Stumpf 1966:24–25). Anaxagoras’ thinking, though criticized by later philosophers like Aristotle for not seeing mind as immanent but only as a force that gets matter into motion (p. 26), is

nevertheless considered the first full-fledged dualist, and his thinking set the stage for Socrates and the thinkers that followed.

Socrates did not claim to have special knowledge or expertise, but his relentless questioning exposed deep flaws in conventional wisdom of his day. For example, Plato, a pupil of Socrates, reports an encounter between Socrates and a young man named Euthyphro outside of a courtroom (where Socrates will soon be found guilty of impiety and sentenced to death). Euthyphro is there to charge his father with murder, which seems, on the face of it, impious to Socrates. Socrates wonders how Euthyphro could bring such an indictment unless he was positive that he would not be doing something impious himself. Euthyphro claims to have knowledge of what does and does not please the gods, that is, what is pious and impious, and so Socrates begins questioning Euthyphro to tease this knowledge out of him. Eventually, Euthyphro claims that what all the gods love is holy and that what all the gods hate is unholy, to which Socrates asks his famous question, “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” (Plato 1966:1:10a). Socrates points to a fundamental problem with relying on the capricious gods of the epic poems as a basis for right behaviour. His questioning presses Euthyphro for the essence of piety, and Euthyphro cannot, in the end, satisfy Socrates’ desire for its definition. Plato gives us insight into Socrates’ thinking on the matter in later dialogues.

In *The Meno,* Socrates questions the military man Meno about virtue. Socrates does not claim to be an expert at understanding or teaching virtue, but he proposes that the way we learn virtue is through “recollection”. Socrates believes virtue, among other things, is implanted into our soul by the gods before birth, and knowledge consists not of learning new truths, but recollecting truths we already know (Reynolds 2009:76). For Socrates, real virtue is living in accord with what we know. Socrates believed that when we act viciously, we are only acting that way because we have not recollected the truth about virtue. This is explained at a deeper level in Plato’s *Crito*, a dialogue between Socrates and a man named Crito. In this dialogue, Socrates is in prison and Crito has a plan for his escape. Socrates will not follow Crito’s plan because he believes life is only

worth living if it is a good life, and a good life is a life lived in accord with virtue. Socrates, having recollected enough about virtue to know that even if he is wronged he should not render evil for evil, chooses to remain in prison and accept his sentence (Kenny 2006:31). In the *Phaedo*, Socrates contemplates the human soul during his last days of life. He argues that while human bodies are changing, things like beauty and morality are unchanging and thus point to a realm beyond the changing material universe (p. 34).

In Plato's *Republic*, we meet a man named Thrasymachus, who argues that justice is not an unchanging thing, but merely the will of the powerful. Plato dispenses with the relativism of Thrasymachus by helping him see that it is possible for those in power to make mistakes about what is just, and thus there exists some universal and external standard of justice beyond the will of the powerful (Plato 1968:339). Plato understands there to be a realm of eternal forms (universals) that stand in a resemblance relationship to every particular. The idea or form of something is the "one" that ties together the "many". There are many different chairs in the world, but what draws them together is that they participate in the idea or form of The Chair. The forms cannot be learned but are recollected as we encounter a concrete particular and remember the idea it resembles. Similarly, what all virtuous acts have in common is their resemblance to the form of Virtue.

Plato discusses the form of The Good in Book VI of *The Republic*. The Good, for Plato, is the highest form which gives goodness, being, and intelligibility to everything, much like the sun allows for sight, colour, warmth, etc. (Plato 1968:507–508). Plato suggests that in the afterlife, happiness and misery are distributed in accord with the virtues and vices enjoined in life (p. 435), though Plato is ambiguous as to the mechanism for this judgment. For Plato, if one endeavours to recollect and thus to live in accordance with Virtue, one's soul will return to inhabit the world of the forms where it can be captivated by The Good. For Plato and Socrates, there exists some eternal realm where Virtue and Goodness and other forms reside. The goal of life in their view is to live in accord with these so that in death, we too will reside in that realm. This final transmigration of the soul into the realm of the forms occurs only when one has

recollected, to a sufficient degree, the Good. This outcome, along with other outcomes based on one's degree of recollection, provides a basis for moral accountability.

Plato's student Aristotle had areas of agreement with Plato as well as some areas of fundamental disagreement. Like Plato, Aristotle distinguished between matter and form, but he argued that we never find form without matter (Stumpf 1966:97). For Aristotle, there is no "realm" of the forms that is outside the material universe. Aristotle believed in a God, a first mover, who sets everything into order and contemplates Himself eternally, since God would not bother himself by thinking about lesser beings (Reynolds 2009:202). Aristotle believed that when we as humans contemplate the form of a thing, our intellect forms a kind of identity between us and the form it sees, which in the end is identical with God contemplating himself. This, for Aristotle, is the highest good, as he did not have a cosmology like Plato's with souls leaving the body (p. 190).

For Aristotle, ultimate happiness occurs through intellectual contemplation. Happiness (*eudaimonia*) for Aristotle is not a feeling but refers to what makes human life a success. What makes life a success is not arbitrary. Every natural substance is a compound of matter and form. The form of a thing is more than its shape; it is a thing's animating force, its internal structure that makes it what it most truly is (Rubenstein 2003:43). Each substance has a goal (*telos*) given by the first mover, and success in life is living out that pattern. For Aristotle, living a virtuous life is part of what it means to function properly and thus live successfully. Aristotle disagreed with Socrates that all it takes to live a virtuous life is to know that something is virtuous. Aristotle had a more pessimistic outlook and believed morality has to do with developing habits of right behaviour (Stumpf 1966:108).

In the centuries following Aristotle but prior to the birth of the Christian religion, philosophy was dominated by three groups: Stoics, Epicureans, and sceptics. The Stoics, founded by Zeno, believed in a rational agent of creation who has determined all things for our good (Kenney 2006:97). God controls and orders the whole structure of nature not as an outside onlooker, but as an

intimate participant in the world. For the Stoic, God was thought to be in everything, and so all of nature is filled with the principle of reason (Stumpf 1966:123). The good life is living with resignation to what had to be and playing one's given role in history (p. 125).

The Epicureans, founded by Epicurus of Samos, rejected the idea of fate and supposed instead that humans enjoy freedom of the will. Epicureans assumed that Democritus's worldview was correct and that the world was made up of atoms, or bits of indivisible matter (Stumpf 1966:118). This meant that if God or gods exist, they must also be material beings produced by purposeless and random events. Epicureans held that the atoms, or bits of matter that make up the material universe, have no beginning (p. 118). If, at the bottom, there is no ultimate rational source for the way things are or should be, the Epicureans believed we could be free to create our own meaning. Epicurus came to see that the highest good available to humankind is pleasure, so he believed that a human's most noble pursuit is the acquisition of pleasure. Epicurus emphasized a distinction between various types of pleasure and held that pursuing bodily pleasures too furiously would actually lead to pain, and so one ought to pursue pleasure in a wise manner (p. 120). The greatest pleasure, thought the Epicureans, was the pleasure that comes when all desires have been satisfied (Kenny 2006:94). This pleasure-seeking morality is an overtly self-centred morality and does not suggest one has obligations to others, though an Epicurean might see cultivating friendships as a high good worth pursuing and might reason that true friendship requires sacrifice and seeking the interest of the other over oneself. Even in this case, pursuing the interests of another person is merely instrumentally good and would stop being moral to the Epicurean if it did not ultimately bring the Epicurean herself pleasure.

Pyrrho (361–270 BC) and his followers were sceptical about the worldview of both the Stoics and Epicureans (Stumpf 1966:127). The sceptics noticed that for every proposition there stands another proposition which is in opposition. This opposition led the sceptics to doubt they could come to any judgments and believed that the only way to live in a calm mental state is to suspend judgment where opposition exists. Since differing lands have differing

customs, including moral customs, the sceptics thought there is no absolute knowledge about morality, only opinion (p. 130). This does not mean most sceptics abandoned morality altogether. While their scepticism led them to forsake absolute moral judgments, many sceptics believed their experiences could create beliefs about morality that, though not certain, were strong enough to lead one into action (p. 131).

2.2.1 Summary of morality in the classical era

In the era prior to the birth of Christianity, we can see a diversity of viewpoints regarding the relationship between God and morality. Homer and Hesiod can be thought to hold a type of deontological morality in which humans have a duty to live according to what the gods require, though what the gods demand was not thought to be static. The Milesian philosophers began to see an order in the universe. They did not believe that every event in human history was tied to some will or whim of the gods. The pre-Socratics that followed came to see something rational about the order in the universe, and some saw a distinction between that rational organizing force and the matter that makes up the world in which we live. This dualism finds full expression in Plato, who sees the reality of morality as ultimately tied to the form or idea of The Good. This belief led Plato to a spirituality in which humans seek to recall The Good through virtuous living with a person's post-mortem outcome being tied to the degree to which that person has lived the good or virtuous life. For Plato, the idea of The Good is directly tied to the reality of morality. The reason something is good is because it resembles The Good.

Aristotle also believed morality is tied to some ultimate reality. His virtue ethic is tightly tied to a concept of human flourishing that is anchored to the design of the First Mover who is immaterial, unchangeable, eternal, and perfect (Rubenstein 2003:44). God, for Aristotle, is pure actuality. While all other substances seek to actualize themselves as their nature allows, God does not strive to actualize anything as God is already perfect (p. 45). Part of the human quest for self-actualization is living the life of virtue. The moral life is thus tied to the pure actuality of the First Mover. For Aristotle, in contemplating virtue

humans contemplate the divine, which is the highest activity in which we humans can be engaged (Baggett 2018:65). For Plato and Aristotle, morality only exists in relation to something transcendent—the Good for Plato or the First Mover for Aristotle.

Other philosophers of the classical era disagreed sharply about the relation of the divine and human morality. The determinism of Stoics, though it removes much of the burden of moral development in an individual, tied human actions directly to divine prerogatives, and thus saw morality as ultimately inseparable from God. In contrast, the Epicureans divorced divinity from morality, but in so doing found no grounds for duties toward others. The sceptics, seeing the deep divide between the viewpoints and finding good reasons for adopting either viewpoint, chose to live a life that seemed best suited for human flourishing without actually weighing in on the grounding of real moral values or duties.

2.3 Morality in the pre-modern era

The early Christian writers found themselves defending Christian ideas regarding God, humanity, sin and justice amongst their pagan interlocutors. In their writings,[6] these early Christians expressed the responsibility humans have for their actions (Knell 2017:21). In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin argues that humans have a high degree of dignity, being created in God's image, and part of this dignity involves a freedom of choice.[7] This freedom then results in God justly punishing those who use their freedom to do evil (p. 22). In his *Apology*, Justin, while affirming God's foreknowledge, emphasized human freedom. This allowed him to "maintain a strong line against a Greek idea of fate controlling destiny" (p. 23).

[6] See, for example, Ignatius' letter to the Magnesians and 2nd Clement.

[7] Free will, when discussed from a Christian perspective in this paper, has this Justinian trajectory. Free will need not be understood to imagine that a human's will is free in every respect, but that humans are faced with genuine choices in life.

The second century AD apologist, Irenaeus of Lyon, also sought to do battle with several ideas circulating in his time that he felt were dangerous to the Christian faith if allowed to propagate unchallenged. Speaking against a Gnostic worldview which "tended towards a strong deterministic position" (Knell 2017:28), Irenaeus argued that humans all share the same nature and are able to hold fast to the good, and so are rightly praised when they do good and blamed when they reject what is fair and good. Like Justin, Irenaeus also ties the free will of humans to the image of God (p. 35), and he is adamant that humans "retain their free will," and so are "fully responsible to God for their actions" (p. 41).

Writing in the second and third century AD, Tertullian of Carthage penned a number of "works defending Christianity against attack from suspect teachings" (Knell 2017:47). In his *Against Marcion*, Tertullian argues that humans were created by God free, the masters of their own will and power.[8] Agreeing with Tertullian that humans are in control of, and are therefore responsible for their actions, is Origen, another theologian of the second and third century. Origen makes the case that free will is at the core of what it means to be human, and how the gospel connects us to God (p. 87). In his works, Origen resolutely places the responsibility to avoid sin and do what is good on humankind in virtue of their being endowed by their creator with free will.[9]

The early Greek Fathers, when writing about morality and human responsibility, cite God's gift of free will to humans, which frees them from being ruled by deterministic forces of the universe (Knell 2017:160). Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and John Chrysostom all see humans as possessors of a free will, responsible to God for sin (p. 176).[10]

While these early Christian Fathers, and the theologians that came before them, speak of the human will being free, one ought not assume that these early

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[8] See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.5–8.

[9] See Origen, *De Principiis* 3.1–3.2.

[10] See Gregory of Nyssa, *On the catechism*, 21; *On Virginity*, 12; and *On the soul and Resurrection*; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 37*; John Chrysostom, *On the priesthood* 2.3.

Christians somehow deny God's sovereignty. Christians have thought about freedom in different ways, but we can see that at least some ancient views are consistent with humans having real moral freedom. These theologians, and modern theologians who follow their thinking, may not believe humans are free in every respect, but that in the course of life humans make choices about how they will conduct their lives, and that they are responsible to a sovereign God for these choices. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), writing in the third and fourth centuries AD, developed fresh ideas relating to God, humans, sin and grace.

Taking his cues from Plotinus (AD 204–270), who connected Plato's Good with God, Augustine connected morality directly to God. For Plotinus, God is the highest good. In his thinking, the mind, soul, and physical world exist as lower levels of existence, with each level being causally dependent on the level above it (Kenny 2006:106). The Manichaeism with which Augustine had been involved was an "essentially static religion" with no hope of progression (Brown 2000:48), and perhaps Augustine found the Neoplatonism of Plotinus appealing because it pointed to a process by which one may progress. The physical world imposes itself upon the soul, awakening the soul to beauty. But the transitory nature of the world cannot sustain such beauty, and so elevates one's thoughts to something beyond the physical world (Brown 2000:88–89). Augustine found this philosophy powerfully present in the preaching of Ambrose of Milan. Augustine converted to Christianity and became ordained as a priest in the late fourth century. Augustine held that just as the eye sees objects in the light of the sun, the mind forms an image of the thing and so knows it. Through this image-forming process, the mind can see immaterial objects bathed in their own light. This is Augustine's theory of "illumination", by which God is thought to enable finite minds to grasp eternal truths (Stumpf 1966:148). This theory enabled Augustine to escape the paralysis of the sceptics by pointing to another source of knowledge that informs the human mind.

Augustine believed that humans were made by God, and as such, could find true happiness only in God. In his *Confessions*, he states, "Oh God Thou hast created us for Thyself so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee" (Augustine 2009:1). The problem humans face, according to Augustine,

is that we tend to attempt to locate our ultimate happiness in something other than God. This disordered love for lesser things leads to many maladies, many of them moral, because for Augustine, it is only the infinite God who can satisfy the need in humankind which is thirst for the infinite (Stumpf 1966:154). This is, for Augustine, the starting place for ethics. Morality is only discernible as God, in his grace, illuminates the human subject's mind to see God's eternal law. Morality depends on God ontologically, and for the human subject, morality also depends on God epistemically. The fact that one knows the good he or she ought to do thus points to God's work to illuminate the person's mind concerning the immutable truths of morality, and thus, for Augustine, points to God's existence and work in one's life. The dependence of morality on God is more deeply described in his treatise, *On the freedom of the will*.

In book two of *On the freedom of the will*, Augustine makes his case for the existence of God to his interlocutor Evodius. He reasons that there are some truths which are immutable, wisdom and numbers being exemplars of this set of truths. Regarding wisdom, Augustine sees, "There is one wisdom that exists alike for all men, such that the more a man partakes of this wisdom, the wiser he is" (Baird and Kaufmann 1996:2:68). This leads him to believe that wisdom, like the truths about numbers, is immutable. Immutable truths are present for all and thus cannot belong to any one particular human. A universal truth, Augustine reasons, cannot be less excellent than our minds, for "if it were less excellent, we would make judgments *about* it, not *according* to it" (p. 71). Truth itself must be higher than our mind and reason. Following this insight Augustine declares to Evodius that "if there is something more excellent than truth, this is God. If there is not, then truth itself is God" (p. 74). Further, truth, and thus God, who is immutable, stands in stark contrast to everything else that is changeable. Augustine notes that nothing can give itself form "since nothing can give to itself what it does not have" (p. 76). Thus, every immutable good must be tied to the immutable God and not be dependent on changing human frailty.

Augustine's argument has led him to believe that "God exists and that all goods come from Him" (Baird and Kaufmann 1996:2:77). Virtues, by which humankind lives rightly, are great goods that are objectively grounded in God.

God has impressed on the human mind an idea of the good and has given us the ability to rank goods we apprehend, thus seeing God as the highest good (Baggett 2018:66). As humans enjoy the highest good, they are truly happy. Thus Augustine links our morality with our happiness.

Thomas Aquinas is another great thinker in the pre-modern era in the Christian tradition who believed objective morality to be ontologically grounded in God's existence. Unique to Aquinas, however, is that he moved beyond explaining the existence of morality in virtue of God's existence and saw the existence of objective values as a vital part of his proof for the existence of God.

Aquinas answered the claim that "it seems that God does not exist" by retorting, "The existence of God can be proved in five ways" (Kreeft 1990:61). In his fourth way Aquinas reasons that whenever we perceive gradation, there must exist a maximum by which we compare other instantiations of the genus. So, to use Aquinas's example, "as a thing is said to be hotter according as it more nearly resembles that which is hottest," gradation in value points us to something of supreme value (p. 68). God is the perfect being that is the ultimate cause of every being and every goodness. Aquinas believed "varying degrees of reality and goodness in the world must be approximations to a subsistent maximum of reality and goodness" (Kenny 2006:153). In short, every "better" implies a "best," which, for Aquinas, is God (Kreeft 1990:69). Virtue, in Aquinas thought, is what makes humans good (Evans 2013:75). "To be more or less good is to participate more or less fully in the most good thing" (Kenny 1969:81). A thing must exist for one to participate in it, and so, for Aquinas, the existence of a gradation in goodness necessitates the maximal/objective grounding of goodness.

2.3.1 Summary of morality in the pre-modern era

Though there were, or course, many thinkers and writers during the pre-modern era, Augustine and Aquinas were the two most influential voices of that time. Augustine believed the existence of morality, as well as our awareness of it, is a testimony to God's nature and work in our lives. Aquinas used our awareness of the gradation of goodness we see in the world as evidence of

some perfectly good being, and thus, saw in the existence of objective morality an argument for God's existence. These thinkers believed in a close connection between objective morality and God. Augustine's and Aquinas's thought suggests that morality is dependent on God—that if God did not exist, we would not have objective morality. For Augustine, if God did not exist there would be no divine illumination for immutable moral truths. For Aquinas, without a highest good we could not distinguish between various acts, seeing in them a greater or lesser approximation of the good, and so morality would be reduced to relativism. He argues that because we do in fact see gradation in virtue, we must also be committed to the existence of the highest good, which he calls God.

2.4 The moral argument in the modern era

The modern era found another voice for the connection between God and morality in the works of the philosophical giant Immanuel Kant (AD 1724–1804). Kant doubted that the traditional proofs for the existence of God could actually prove God's existence. For reasons that extend beyond the scope of this project, Kant believed that the cosmological, teleological, and ontological proofs of his day were not persuasive. Yet Kant also found the concept of God to be indispensable. In his examination of morality, what he calls "practical reason", Kant argues for a categorical imperative. This imperative is a principle of conduct that he says all rational people recognize they ought to follow. Kant believes this principle compels us to see others as an end in themselves, and not as a means to an end. He claims we have a duty to act only in such a way that we could, at the same time, will that act to be universalized. That is, we can only act in a way that we could also commend to all humans at all times. Kant understands that we don't always want to act that way, but the fact that we *can* act against our inclinations to treat others as a means to an end shows that humans have the freedom to pursue duty for duty's sake. But why would a person spurn personal gain and pleasure to pursue duty? Kant believes reason produces the moral law out of our own will. This principle of autonomy legislates our duty from within, and not by means of some other's interest (Baird and Kaufmann 1996:3:613). Indeed, for Kant, a person is only morally virtuous to the extent that the person

acts for the sake of duty (Aune 1979:170). Kant seems to indicate that there are three ingredients required for his deontological ethic to succeed.

First, Kant believed freedom to be a postulate of morality. Morality requires that we are in fact free to fulfil the duty we legislate. Second, morality requires a perfect ideal, a highest good, and it requires that this ideal be actual and real somewhere (Kreeft 1990:64). Kant saw that morality must be anchored in some ontological reality that exists outside of our world, for in our world, justice does not always triumph over evil. The hope of morality is that doing one's duty will promote real happiness. While Kant believes real moral action does not take into consideration the effect which is expected from the act, but merely acts out of respect for law (Baird and Kaufmann 1996:3:594–595), he also believes rational beings are only fully satisfied when there is a union between virtue and happiness (Stumpf 1966:325). If human experience were limited to this world alone, then it would seem impossible for a person to arrive at this highest good—this final satisfaction that the moral law makes it our duty to take as its object. Thus, for Kant, the hope for morality must be found outside our world. Kant held that a person does not have a duty to pursue his own happiness, as he does this naturally (Aune 1979:174). However, a person does have a duty to one's self development as a free moral being (Byrne 2007:83). This is because Kant believes we have an obligation to pursue the highest good, which is happiness arising out of complete virtue (p. 86). In order to harmonize this duty to pursue the highest good and our duty to pursue others as an end (even at the expense of our own personal happiness), there needs to be something to link our desire for happiness and our duty to respect the moral law. For Kant, God is the postulate that assures that our happiness and our duty to the moral law are connected (p. 85).

This also points to a third postulate. The third necessary ingredient for morality, according to Kant, is the immortality of the soul, which makes possible the hope of satisfaction for moral action beyond this world. Kant saw God as the ultimate guarantor that the aims of morality are grounded in something real while also giving happiness to those who deserve it. Thus, in this linkage, Kant sees

God's existence as the "postulate" of pure practical reason, the grounds for the connection between virtue and happiness.

Peter Byrne points out that Kant has faced numerous critics, some going back to his own day. It has been argued that Kant's postulates may simply be wishful thinking. Kant believed that without freedom, immortality, and God, morality must simply be directed to empty imaginary ends (Byrne 2007:95). While this may not be a pleasant thought, Kant's argument does not seem to have proven that God exists, but only that without God there is no solid foundation for objective moral values and duties. Kant may be right that without God my duty to pursue the happiness of others (complete independence from needs) is an unachievable goal (pp. 109–110). But perhaps, the critic might argue, we have no real duty to pursue happiness in others. The postulate of God is linked to the hope that the highest good is attainable, but it does not function as a proof that God exists, merely as an example of the great good that would come from such a being's existence. Kant's moral law prescribes an end for humans they are not able to accomplish through their own powers. Kant sees this fact pointing to the existence of a being that can accomplish what duty requires (Ricken 2009:223). Others simply see this as a reason to reject either objective moral duty or moral duty's ability to connect to our highest good. Paradigmatic of such thinking is the German philosopher of the modern era, Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche was struck by the unflinching recognition and inevitability of human suffering depicted in Greek thought (Solomon and Higgins 1996:233). Unlike traditions that tend to link suffering to human sin, Nietzsche admired the Hellenistic idea embodied in the Athenian tragedy in which frail humans find satisfaction as part of the "wild, unfolding rush of life". In contrast, Nietzsche thought the Christian worldview, epitomized by the empty deadness of formalism in cathedrals in Europe, was the greatest obstacle to the fullness of human expression. Without a God dictating to them, humans are free to express fully their own will to live (Kenny 2006:331). Moral intuitions, according to Nietzsche, are nothing more than vestigial appendages from a dead and dying religious worldview. Nietzsche saw belief in God waning in his day and believed this was

a sign of progress. Humans had finally found the courage to face life without the need of an afterlife or a moral dictator. His pronouncement that “God is dead,” Nietzsche thought, enabled humans to live authentically and freely in a way that was not possible when they thought God was there. As the German thinker understood, this idea would have far-reaching consequences.

In his *Twilight of the idols and the anti-Christ*, Nietzsche said, “Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities” (Nietzsche 1968:55). For Nietzsche, the death of God meant the death of the moral point of view. He rejected the idea of a universally binding morality to which everybody is accountable (Stumpf and Fieser 2012:364). This he expressed simply enough: “there are altogether no moral facts” (Nietzsche 1968:55). This rejection of the foundation for morality, Nietzsche thought, would allow the Superman to emerge through freedom of the will to power. This will to power, for Nietzsche, is the “embodiment of the spontaneous affirmation of life” (Stumpf and Fieser 2012:368). The path to this new humanity is based on “healthy self-assertion” (Solomon and Higgins 1996:234), not what he thought was weak Christian self-abasement or repression. Though this view entails nihilism, the Superman has learned that this “truth” about the world is an empowering reality to embrace which will lead to the will to power.

2.4.1 Summary of the moral argument in the modern era

Kant saw God as indispensable to moral reasoning. God is, for Kant, the bridge between what we can do and what we ought to do (Hare 2000:189–190). The fact that we can live for duty’s sake, for Kant, is grounded in the belief that ultimately God guarantees that living for duty’s sake will lead to happiness. Without God, we have no link between duty and the highest good, and thus no reason to act contrary to inclinations to treat others merely as a means to our ends (Byrne 2007:135). God is needed to guarantee the highest good is achievable and is thus required as a motivator for moral action (p. 132). God, immortality, and freedom make up the necessary requirements for objective moral duties.

Nietzsche seems to agree with Kant that without God there seems to be no grounding for objective moral duties. Nietzsche understood that the death of God meant the death of objective moral values. He suggests that the next step for humanity is to embrace a life without such values.

2.5 19th and 20th century developments

Apology has occupied a central place in the history of the Christian church. Early Christians found the need to defend their doctrine and practice from philosophers and magistrates alike. The field of apologetics was enlivened in the post-Enlightenment era as attacks on the rationality of God proliferated. English deism of the eighteenth century and thinkers of the ilk of the Frenchmen Voltaire and Rousseau led to increased criticism of the Bible and belief in God. An American, Alexander Bruce, attempted to respond to this wave of criticism by pointing to the superiority of the Christian worldview over the developing materialistic worldview and deistic theory. The moral argument for God's existence formed a part of Bruce's repudiation of the materialistic worldview that had been advancing.

Materialism, Bruce believed, destroys belief in human freedom. On atheistic materialism, all actions are merely "parts of the great series of causes and effects which, in unbroken continuity, composes that which is, and has been, and shall be, the sum of existence" (Bruce 1905:99, quoting Huxley 1888:239–40*).* This, Bruce saw, "renders anything like a fixed code of morals impossible" (Bruce 1905:100). Morality, at best, becomes a purely personal ethic. The Christian God, on the contrary, is a rational, self-determining, and ethical being (p. 59). Bruce believes that humans, endowed with freedom of the will and living in light of God's moral character, have a sound basis for distinguishing between moral and immoral action (p. 60). For Bruce, the fact that morality can be accounted for in the Christian worldview but not on the materialistic one counts as an apologetic for the Christian worldview.

Across the pond, a number of British philosophers sought to strengthen the moral argument for God (Bertocci 1938:275). In 1870 J.H. Newman argued

for God's existence on the basis of human conscience. He believed that our feeling of responsibility, shame, and longing for approval point to a reality beyond the natural world (Baggett 2018:69). Since no earthly person can systematically fill these roles, Newman saw this moral sense related to a supernatural person. Newman seems to have understood God to fulfil an "answerability", or accountability needed in moral theory (Mackie 1982:104). J.L. Mackie has criticized Newman's view by claiming that if human conscience does give a reason for doing or refraining from some action, then it need not look beyond the agent himself to some further imperative. Perhaps Newman would respond by arguing that the reason for an action provided by one's conscience is only as real as the God who holds us accountable for the act. Newman's claim does highlight the role that feelings of praise and blame have in moral decision making. A full moral theory will explain how these experiences of guilt and shame connect to objective moral values and duties.

William Lane Craig highlights William Sorley, another British scholar of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as a major figure in the development of the moral argument for God's existence. In Sorley's 1918 Gifford Lectures, "Moral values and the idea of God," he "argues that God as the ground of the natural and moral orders best provides for a rational, unified view of reality" (Craig 1984:88). Sorley contended that while one cannot prove objective morals exist, they are as apparent to us as the reality of the natural order (p. 89). Our perception of the objective moral order provides the basis for our subjective moral judgments. These judgments, though not infallible, point to an objective grounding for morality. For Sorley, "The moral ideal is nowhere actualized in the finite world, but instead in a personal and eternal God" (Baggett 2018:72). Sorley believed the existence of God to best explain the ontological reality of objective moral values (p. 89).

Peter Bertocci reprimands Sorley's view and sees it plagued with a fundamental difficulty in that a human's perception of God's perfect moral qualities is "ever dim and obscure," and thus Sorley's ethical thinking is a "guaranty of moral dissatisfaction" (Bertocci 1938:279). Bertocci raises a significant problem. A moral theory that assumes God is the ultimate standard

for objective moral values seems to be incomplete as a moral theory if it does not include some mechanism for apprehending God's moral quality. Even if there is some objective moral standard, if we are epistemically cut off from it, then it does not seem to be a firm foundation for objective moral duties.

A.E. Taylor made a major contribution to the moral argument in his 1926–1928 Gifford Lectures (Baggett 2018:72). He argued that moral values are best seen as "properties of persons, not mere Platonic abstractions". Taylor understood that objective morality would need to find a higher source than human persons since humans often break and ignore moral laws. Taylor believed God to be the only being capable of being the source of objective moral law (p. 73).

Over the course of World War II, another voice articulated an argument for God's existence based on objective morality. C.S. Lewis was asked to explain what Christians believe, and, in a series of radio broadcasts, Lewis delivered addresses that would later be collected and published as *Broadcast Talks* [aka *The case for Christianity*] (1942), and then with additional material as *Mere Christianity* (1952). Lewis argued that "we are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong", though we may be mistaken about them (Lewis 1952:7). He points out that we seem to be free to follow what we believe to be right or not to follow it. Lewis leads the listening ear to conclude that if God did exist, we should expect just those two facts. We should expect a God to direct the universe and to give rational agents the freedom to respond to his direction. If there is no God, then the universe is a "mere mechanical dance of atoms", which would not produce either of the two facts we take to be part of the human condition (p. 26).

2.5.1 Summary of the 19th and 20th century developments

In response to the growing number of sceptical and critical voices regarding God's existence that flowed from the enlightenment, a number of philosophers began refining arguments for God's existence. The moral argument came to take on new significance as objective moral values and duties were understood to be phenomena that needed to be explained. Indeed, Sorely,

Lewis, and Bruce all pointed to the human experience of free will in following moral truths as a guide to a reality beyond materialism. Both Sorely and Lewis begin with the assumption that man's apprehension of the moral order is so strong that it is virtually undeniable. God's existence is the best, if not a necessary, explanation of this feature of human experience.

2.6 Contemporary voices for the moral argument

The twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of metaphysical thinking and a renaissance in Christian philosophy (Craig and Moreland 2012:ix). This renewed interest in Christian philosophy "served to reinvigorate natural theology, that branch of theology that seeks to provide warrant for belief in God's existence apart from the resources of authoritative, propositional revelation". The moral argument is regularly featured as one of the important natural theological arguments for God's existence (e.g. Beckwith, Craig and Moreland 2004; Craig 2002; Craig and Moreland 2012; Moreland, Meister and Sweis 2013).

One form of the moral argument has been popularized by the prolific debating of philosopher William Lane Craig. In his *Philosophical foundations for a Christian worldview* (2003), Craig argues:

1. If God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

This argument takes the form of *modus tollens* argument.

Modus Tollens	Craig's Argument
P → Q	If Atheism (A) → there are no objective moral values or duties (- O)
-Q	-(-O)
_____	_____
- P	- A

Craig summarizes this argument from time to time by reducing the argument to two contentions (Garcia and King 2009:30):

1. If theism is true, we have a sound foundation for morality.
2. If theism is false, we do not have a sound foundation for morality.

Paul Copan has argued along similar lines, reasoning (Copan 2004:108–123):

1. If objective moral values exist, then God exists.
2. Objective moral values do exist.
3. Therefore, God exists.

This argument takes the form of a *modus ponens* argument.

Modus Ponens	Copan's Argument
P → Q	If Objective moral values exist (O) → God exists (G)
P	O
_____	_____
Q	G

Both Copan's and Craig's arguments are valid. For an argument to be cogent, one must accept the argument to be sound as well. Soundness turns on the truthfulness of the individual premises as they work together leading to a conclusion in a valid way. Though Copan and Craig's arguments differ in form, they both trade on two assumptions. First, that objective morality exists, and second, that there is a causal connection between God's existence and objective moral values and duties. These assumptions need to be evaluated.

Both Craig and Copan take as a premise in their argument, "objective moral values exist". It would be hard to imagine seeing a father who loves and nurtures his child and a father who neglects and abuses his child and concluding that these actions are morally equivalent. Further, most people engaged in moral reasoning can see that it is wrong to murder people based solely on their race and so rightly condemn the atrocities of Nazi Germany. This shared moral experience, even if it differs in small ways, imposes certain duties that we

understand to lay claim upon us (Craig 2013:89). To make such a judgment is to assume, with Craig and Copan, that morality transcends individuals and societies. The ubiquity of belief in objective morality is evidenced in our strong insistence on being able to accuse others of wrongdoing, being able to see instances of injustice in the world, being able to improve our morals (rather than simply change them), and being able to point out moral exemplars (see further Beckwith and Koukl 1998). Human moral experience imposes on us duties that we understand to lay claim to us in powerful ways; we infer from this experience a realm of objective moral values and duties (Craig and Gorra 2013:89–90).

Of course, it's abstractly possible that the physical world around us does not really exist and that we are currently a brain in a vat somewhere. It is possible that objective moral values and duties are mere illusions. However, our perception of the physical world and of objective moral values impose themselves upon us with such force as to make them nearly indubitable. This unshakable belief provides many with sufficient grounds for accepting the second premise of both Copan's and Craig's arguments. Those who accept the reality of moral truths are in the moral realist camp. Moral realists hold that there are moral facts and that these moral facts render our moral judgments true or false (Copp 2005:40). The alternative would be to embrace nihilism as the deepest answer to the moral question. This anti-realist position denies the reality of moral facts (pp. 41–42).

One popular version of this anti-realist position explains our felt experience of morality as owing to the evolutionary process and not by actually existing moral obligations. Perhaps, or so the story goes, our "perception" of morality is a useful fiction that provides humans with an adaptive advantage that aids our reproductive fitness. On this non-realist view one can engage in moral reasoning, but ought to see the product of such reasoning as an aid to survival and not connected to any transcendental grounding. On this view, ethics are "psychological beliefs put in place by natural selection in order to maintain and improve our reproductive fitness. There is nothing more to them than that" (Ruse 2012:65). Though some philosophers embrace this anti-realist position, the

consensus seems to be that moral realism fits most naturally with what we seem to be doing in making moral claims and is the default position (Copp 2005:42).

As said earlier, some philosophers see a necessary link between God and morality. Just what is it that leads some philosophers to make that connection? To help gain an understanding of this link, several possible alternatives will be considered. If atheistic naturalism is able to account for objective moral values, then the supposed link between God and objective morality would not be necessary. By "naturalism" I mean that worldview that is committed to: 1) a physicalist view of reality according to which everything that exists is either physical or else it depends necessarily on the physical for its emergence and continued existence, 2) the atomic theory of matter in which all chemical change is the result the rearrangement of protons, neutrons, and electrons, and 3) a creation story that revolves around an evolutionary theory in which random genetic mutations produce changes in organisms whereby environmental pressures select for the most genetically fit organisms such that new traits that are more fit eventually become ubiquitous throughout the species (Moreland 2007:41–44).

Atheist philosopher J.L. Mackie sees objective morality to be at home in a theistic world but not in an atheistic one. From his perspective, the reality of objective morality would indeed provide positive support for theism (Mackie 1982:115–116). This has led him and others who share this intuition to grant the first premise of Craig and Copan's above arguments, and, on the basis of that agreement, deny the reality of objective morality.[1] These naturalists tend to eliminate anything that does not fit with the above three naturalistic premises. Eliminative naturalists might add objective morality to a list of things like free will, consciousness, and reason, which are not at home in an atheistic naturalistic universe. Of course, the mere fact that some atheists deny the existence of morality on the basis of their naturalistic assumptions does not prove an atheistic

[1] Atheistic philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche is often mentioned as a paradigmatic atheistic thinker whose atheism led him to deny the existence of objective morality. Alex Rosenberg is a recent example of an atheist who denies objective moral values and duties on the basis of an atheistic eliminative materialistic worldview (Rosenberg 2011:95–145).

worldview and cannot account for objective moral values and duties. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Sam Harris, and Thomas Nagel are atheistic thinkers who claim their naturalism does not exclude the existence of objective moral values and duties (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:65; Harris 2007:8–24).

Sinnott-Armstrong believes morality to be objective in the sense that some behaviours cause harm to others for unjustified reasons (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:65). Harris sees, in biology and psychology, facts about what enables a person to flourish. He believes that flourishing provides humans with objectively better or worse ways to seek happiness, and thus, provides an enduring basis for an objective morality. I see three major flaws with these sorts of theories which attempt to wed objective morality together with a naturalistic worldview that believes humans are the product of an unguided evolutionary process.

First, there is reason to be sceptical that an atheistic world has the necessary ingredients for objective morality. For example, following Kant and Bruce, without genuine freedom, it is difficult to see how a person can be considered a moral agent. Rape and murder occur frequently in the animal kingdom, but we do not typically consider a male lion's causing pain by having forced sex with a female lion as immoral. Sinnott-Armstrong believes that while the lion is not immoral, a human perpetrating a similar act on one of its own species is immoral. He reasons that a human has moral duties and values in virtue of a human's possession of free will. Thus, Sinnott-Armstrong seems to believe that without a free will, there would be no objective morality. If objective morality is dependent on free will, it seems Sinnott-Armstrong is stuck believing that if free will had not emerged from the evolutionary process, then objective morality would not have emerged either. There are several major problems with Sinnott-Armstrong's view.

On the one hand, it is hard for many philosophers (atheistic and theistic alike) to see how an evolutionary naturalism could produce free will. Atheist thinker Sam Harris believes "the idea that we, as conscious beings, are deeply responsible for the character of our mental lives and subsequent behaviour is

simply impossible to map onto reality" (Harris 2012:13; cf. Moreland 2009:41–66). Free will, on an atheistic model, may simply be "an illusion" (Harris 2012:3), at best, or perhaps as Sam Harris has suggested, the illusion of free will itself is an illusion (Harris 2012:64). By this, Harris means that the human condition, when reflected on and analysed, shows us that our experience of free will itself is mistaken and we do not feel as free as we think we do (p. 64). At any rate, it seems the naturalistic worldview leads one to suppose every event is caused by prior events that are beyond one's control. This includes both physical and mental events, as mental events in the end are reduced to neurons firing in the brain, and so are physical events as well. One could try to smuggle free will into the human experience through quantum indeterminacy. Even if a person holds to some sort of quantum indeterminacy, still, at the level where things matter (at the level of cause and effect), things are determined. Even if cause and effect is cast in terms of probability rather than direct cause and effect, on the naturalistic worldview, there is still no justification to think that the human mind can affect the probability one way or the other, and so free will vanishes.

Some thinkers have attempted to show that somehow free will and determinism are actually compatible. This position, known as compatibilism, holds that freedom does not mean non-determined and that humans often act freely in a completely determined way. This does not seem like a solution to the naturalistic problem.[11] The question is not whether humans have psychological reasons that cause them to think or do things. Rather, we are asking if the forces acting upon people are *sufficient* to determine their behaviour, so that things have to happen the way they do happen. If, at the end of the day, humans could not have done differently, then compatibilism seems just to acknowledge that there are psychological forces at work but that these are determined as much as anything else, and thus humans still lack free will. If free will is found to be absent in an atheistic naturalistic worldview, then Sinnott-Armstrong's morality evaporates. Without moral freedom, any claim that a human is a moral agent is

[11] Some forms of theistic compatibilism may be able to hold humans to be moral agents in a way that naturalistic compatibilists are not. When speaking about compatibilism in what follows, this paper is addressing naturalistic compatibilism in which no God exists, and so there are no free beings at all.

doomed to fail. As David and Marybeth Baggett point out, “Moral freedom functions at the foundation of the whole moral edifice. Morality is prescriptive. In other words, it tells us how we ought to live, and this makes sense only if we have sufficient volitional control” (Baggett 2018:55).[12] Alternatively, free will, if it obtains, may be seen as a defeater for naturalism (Moreland 2009:66), as it points to a reality beyond what naturalism is capable of generating and thus points to a supernatural cause.

Before pointing out a second major problem with Sinnott-Armstrong’s position, it should be pointed out that while Sinnott-Armstrong seems to see free will (assuming its compatibility with naturalism) as a sufficient condition for morality, he does not explain how objective moral values obtain in virtue of one’s possession of free will. Free will appears to be a necessary component for genuine moral action, though not a sufficient condition. The mere existence of a choice is not helpful in determining that one choice is moral and another immoral. This problem is linked to the second major flaw.

The second major problem with the atheistic accounts of morality has to do with its dependence on evolution as an explanation of the origins of morality. Evolutionary biology may account for certain behaviours being adaptively advantageous, but it is hard to extrapolate from there to a necessary link between fitness and objective morality. As atheist philosopher Alex Rosenberg opines, “Science has no way to bridge the gap between is and ought” (Rosenberg 2011:330). That is, science can weigh things accurately and show what helps an organism thrive, but it cannot say if an organism has a duty to thrive. Evolutionary biology can tell us what is advantageous, but not that we have an obligation to pursue life or the advantage a behaviour confers. While it may be clear that act *x* supports the well-being of another person and that act *y* is detrimental to the well-being of that person, given that one is free with regard

[12] D.A. Carson argues that responsibility is linked concretely to free will (Carson 1994:206). Carson does not find free will to include an absolute power to contrary (p. 197), but sees free will as the “power of unconstrained, spontaneous, voluntary, and therefore responsible choice” (p. 207).

to *x* or *y*, it is not clear on atheistic naturalism, that one is obligated to pursue *x* rather than *y*.

Thomas Nagel points out that the typical Darwinian story sees all features of life as features that have emerged as a result of natural selection. Vision, it is thought, developed because it confers a survival advantage "which is necessary for all kinds of successful functioning" (Nagel 2012:108). Pursuing that same line of thought, Nagel finds difficulty in ascribing real badness or goodness to any outcome of evolutionary process. Pain, for example, may enhance fitness in that it leads us to avoid injury associated with pain. However, Nagel sees that in this evolutionary explanation the actual goodness or badness of pain is "completely superfluous" (Nagel 2012:109). Sinnott-Armstrong and Harris give no reasons to believe one is obligated to pursue well-being or flourishing or to alleviate suffering. There appears to be no discernible duty to pursue reproductive advantage.

Harris and Sinnott-Armstrong seem stuck, unable to move from descriptive facts about human nature to value judgments about those facts. As Mitch Stokes points out, "If all value depends on conscious value, on a valuing subject, and if naturalism is true, then all value is entirely dependent on human preference" (Stokes 2016:201). If this is a true statement of the moral landscape, then morality, on atheistic naturalism, would be purely subject to individual values. As Nagel points out, from a Darwinist perspective, "our impressions of value are completely groundless, just as scientific realism would be undermined if we abandoned a realistic interpretation of the perceptual experiences on which science is based" (Nagel 2012:109). Pleasure and pain may be real, and evolutionary naturalism may account for these, but what evolutionary naturalism cannot seem to do is link more objective value to one of these experiences than another. This flaw is fatal to naturalistic grounding of objective moral values and duties because, in the end, it reduces moral action to actions that promote reproductive fitness, but it provides no duty to pursue that goal. This view undermines the reality of human moral actions.

A third flaw in the thinking of Harris and Sinnott-Armstrong's morality is that, at their root, their theories are consequentialist. What counts on a consequentialist theory is the positive or negative consequences of one's actions. These sorts of theories run into serious problems. One problem is that if well-being is tied to brain states, "two identical brain states (regardless of their cause), would result in identical levels of well-being" (Stokes 2016:185). Thus, a person whose brain is controlled to have identical brain states as a person living in bliss, but whose actual life is horrific, has similar levels of "wellbeing" despite the obvious inclination that one of those people seems better off than the other.

Further, most consequentialists consider wellbeing in terms of the greatest good for the greatest number of subjects. Many find it difficult to define just what entities to include in such evaluations (cf. Singer 2011), but beyond that initial hurdle, consequentialist theories may create problematic scenarios in which some persons are permitted to be mistreated for the sake of the "greater good". Consider a magistrate who decides to punish a person she knows to be innocent in order to calm public fear over the escape of a dangerous criminal. In such a scenario, one person is harmed, but the entire realm experiences a sense of relief and well-being.

Even more problematic, consequentialist theories produce varying results regarding right and wrong as each valuer is left to determine what acts will produce the "greater good". A rapist may value his unseemly act at such a high value to him personally that it justifies the harm to the victim, and thus, that person may see the act as morally obligatory. Even if one believes rape is wrong as a rule—that is, that as a rule that if everybody raped we'd be worse off as a society—nonetheless, the reasoning actor may come to believe that as a rule it is obligatory to do what produces the most well-being in each case, and that in this case, rape will produce the most well-being. Even if the actor is wrong about this, the rapist's reason would obligate the action on this moral theory.

Not only is this conclusion abhorrent, authorizing acts that seem obviously immoral, but this reasoning also seems to reduce morality to a mere prudential good. Morality becomes a means to some good, namely well-being. But

prudential goods are not normative; they appear to be conditional. Prudential goods take the form, "If you value *x*, then you should do *x*". I might suggest to a friend, "You should see the new Star Wars movie". He might also reply, "I don't care for that saga and so I'll not waste my time and money on it". My "should" in this case is not prescriptive, but prudential. The weight it carries is dependent on the person's desire for the activity in question. Thus, my "should" in this case is dependent on the valuer's estimation of the activity. Objective morality, on the other hand, is not thought of as dependent on a person's valuation and is instead about what that person ought to do regardless of their valuation. Lamentably, on naturalism, it seems morality dissolves into a subjective crisis in which moral reasoning has "no more objective validity than a taste for sugar" (Nagel 2001:141). This is another way of expressing Nietzsche's insight that on naturalism, "There are altogether no moral facts" (Nietzsche 1968:55).

Evolutionary naturalism seems to be at an impasse. Some of those who espouse that worldview want to affirm the existence of moral values and duties, yet the worldview does not seem to support their existence. Nagel notes that the evolutionary self-understanding almost certainly requires us to give up moral realism (Nagel 2012:28). Yet, some atheists, like Nagel, want to hold on to moral realism. Before we consider how objective moral values fit into a theistic worldview, we must evaluate other moral theories that are in accord with naturalism in order to determine if they are able to account for objective moral values and duties.

Mark Linville's chapter on the moral argument in the *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* weighs many prominent ethical theories' ability to provide a satisfactory account for our moral convictions. On ethical egoism, one only has direct duties to oneself, and thus rape may be wrong but only because it harms the rapist (Linville 2009:420). This does not make sense of our moral intuitions that at least some immoral acts harm others. Utilitarianism, as a consequentialist theory, fails to accord moral standing to individual members of the moral community and thus in utilitarianism rape is wrong, not because it harms an individual, but because of the consequences in the community (p. 425). For the utilitarian, rather than focusing one's attention on individuals, moral

actors ought instead to concern themselves with maintaining a cosmic scale of net utility. Both of these theories seem highly questionable to Linville, who wonders why one shouldn't instead pursue the common-sense idea that individuals have moral standing.

Virtue ethics focus on developing virtue in moral agents. Linville points out that, like ethical egoism, morality on virtue ethics is concerned with the character of the agent. The real problem with rape, on virtue theory, is not that it harms a person with moral standing, but that a person is acting in a way inconsistent with developing agents of virtue. The root problem is that the only way to arrive at a satisfactory moral theory is to assume the moral standing of individuals. Yet naturalism does not seem capable of grounding this presumption. The naturalist is unable to derive the personal from the impersonal, derive values from a valueless universe, or bring together the personal and valuable "with the result of a coherent and plausible notion of personal dignity" (Linville 2009:443).

Sinnott-Armstrong seems to recognize the difficulties in finding morality to be an objective part of a naturalistic universe, but he brushes this problem off: "If all secular accounts to the grounding problem prove to be inadequate, that would only be a problem for atheism only if theists could give a better answer" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:76). So, do theists have a better ground to stand on in affirming moral values and duties?

To arrive at a satisfactory moral theory, one needs an accounting of personal dignity as well as some grounding for objective moral values and duties to others whose dignity affords them moral standing. Christian theism seems to do just that, while on atheistic naturalism humans are just an accidental arrangement of atoms and hold no special place or value in the cosmos. Christian theism holds "that the one thing that is both metaphysically and axiological ultimate is a person, so personhood and value are necessarily united in God" (Linville 2009:443). God values human persons because he created them with value as persons created after his own image as a person with a rational and moral nature (p. 445). With respect to humans the value of other humans is objective, grounded in God's valuing of them. One's duty to treat

others with the dignity with which their value endows them stems from one's duty to value the things God values. This is one of the fundamental tenets of divine command theory.

Divine command theory (DCT) claims our obligations are grounded in God's commands. The "grounding problem" is the central problem of metaethics. DCT theorists have proposed that God, as the grounding for objective values, obligates humans by issuing commands. This theory thus proposes an answer to both the central metaethical question and the epistemological question regarding how human agents may come to know the good they are obligated to do. If God is the source of objective moral values and duties, then, as Craig and Copan have argued, there exists a firm foundation for objective values and duties. Humans, on Christian theism, are inherently valuable and morally obligated. Theism provides what naturalism cannot: objective moral values and duties.

This brief examination of morality's relationship to God has shown the truth of J.L. Mackie's trenchant claim that moral properties "constitute so odd a cluster of properties and relations that they are most unlikely to have arisen in the course of events without an all-powerful god to create them" (Mackie 1982:115). Thomas Nagel sees that theism does indeed provide a solid ground for ascribing value to a person while grounding objective moral values and duties. He sees that things like value and reason are more at home in a religious context than in an eliminative materialistic one. Because atheistic naturalism is typically understood to entail the total causal closure of the universe, it is very hard to see how thoughts could have an about-ness or intentionality, or how thoughts and beliefs which, on atheistic naturalism are to thought to be brain states (which cannot be true or false), can be either true or false (Reppert, 2003:73-77). But Nagel, being an atheist, has also opined, "I want atheism to be true" (Nagel 1997:130). This fear of religion and hope for an atheistic explanation has led him to consider the possibility that "rationality could be a fundamental feature of the natural order" (p. 138).

For Nagel, reason must be fundamental. He sees teleology in matter, and in this teleology value is not accidental. He hopes that matter itself may hold a cosmic predisposition to the formation of life, consciousness, and value itself (Nagel 2012:123). J.P. Moreland characterizes this view as a form of panpsychism (Moreland 2009:38). Panpsychism, roughly, “is the view that all matter has consciousness in it”. There is no evidence that all matter is conscious, and a philosopher like Nagel may not believe that all matter possesses the same consciousness as a human. Nagel might suggest that perhaps in matter there exists a degraded form of consciousness which, when appearing in certain configurations, allows the full consciousness we enjoy. Moreland points out that in this weaker version of panpsychism it is difficult to explain either 1) what this proto-mental entity is or 2) how the full unity of consciousness that “appears to characterize the self could emerge from a mere system of parts standing together in various causal and spatio-temporal relations” (p. 39). Even deeper than these problems, Moreland points out that panpsychism is, at its root, not an explanation of the phenomena to be explained, but merely a label of the problem.

David Baggett and Jerry Walls are also unconvinced by Nagel’s preference for panpsychism over theism. Nagel seems to prefer his theory over theism because it presents him with a comprehensive natural order. Baggett and Walls argue that Nagel’s view, which they dub “teleological emergentism” (Baggett and Walls 2016:43), is not the best explanation for the comprehensive natural order or an integrated picture of reality. If one’s aesthetic preference for a worldview is that reality be integrated and unified, they argue that such a person should be a theist (p. 52). Theism offers a legislator whose laws provide the consistency we need to live and to pursue knowledge of the world. Christian theism may “ratify your faith in uniformity as regards to the over whelming majority of events” (CS Lewis 2002:395–396), while at the same time, provide grounds for believing that God has integrated the natural and the supernatural. In the incarnation, which perfectly weds the rational and the material, we find a witness to the kind of integration and unity Nagel had hoped for (Baggett and Walls:53).

It seems that Craig is correct that there is no way to arrive at objective moral values and duties without presupposing God as the grounding. Since objective moral values and duties exist, the conclusion of the argument follows: God exists. It appears to me that both Craig and Copan's arguments are valid and sound and so provide a cogent reason to believe God exists on the basis of the moral argument. Objective morality is difficult to dispense with, and once one assents to its reality, it points to the existence of God with ruthless tenacity.

Several theistic philosophers have criticized the argument recently. In Baggett and Walls's recent book, *God & cosmos*, the authors argue that even if the argument is not a bad one, it does not convince many atheists because it starts with an existing universe and the moral apprehensions we have in that world, and then it tries to eliminate all alternative theories. For Baggett and Walls, this gives up too much. They point out that "if classical theists are right, then a world like this one—or any world at all, in fact—could not exist without God. God is the ground of being without whom nothing else can exist" (Baggett and Walls 2016:64). Indeed, many theists hold that the universe began to exist a finite time ago and that this existence requires a transcendent cause. Further, many theists believe that the universe as it exists presently bears witness to incredible fine-tuning which teaches us about the creative power and purposes this transcendent cause. For Baggett and Walls, to start the moral argument by asking the atheist to envision a world just like this one in which there is no God is conceding far too much (p. 75). For them, arguing about a world in which the ground of being does not exist seems problematic to say the least (p. 78).

This does not mean that Baggett and Walls have given up on the moral argument for God's existence. Far from it! Rather, they have chosen to move away from the deductive versions of Copan and Craig, and instead they approach the argument as an inference to the best explanation. This abductive form begins by affirming common convictions both atheists and theists share, namely the existence of objective moral facts, and then asks what best accounts for such facts in all their richness (Baggett and Walls 2016:65). This, they believe, avoids the pitfall of deductive arguments which may encourage atheists to "assume such a world like the actual world is consistent with atheism and then

inviting them to construct a secular ethic". The theist, they argue, would do well to recall that "if an Anselmian God did not exist, *per impossibile*, nothing would exist at all, including moral facts" (p. 67, italics in original).

While the abductive argument for the existence of God from morality is a powerful one, the theist need not abandon the deductive version of the argument. Baggett and Walls may be correct that the argument fails to convince many committed atheists (Baggett and Walls 2016:64). However, this does not demonstrate a failure on the part of the argument; rather, it seems to speak more to a psychological phenomenon than to the cogency of the argument. What the deductive version of the argument provides is a solid rational basis for belief in God on the basis of real objective morality. That is, after understanding this argument, one *ought* to believe God exists. The committed atheist may not believe God exists after working through the argument, but this may be due not to a failure of the argument as much as it is due to some feature of his or her psychology. If that is in fact the case, the abductive version of the argument might not do much better to change the belief system of the committed atheist.

2.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has identified several important features a moral theory must explain. It appears that in order to be a moral realist regarding objective moral values and duties, one must have a metaphysical grounding for those objective values and duties. Those values and duties must be grounded in something beyond descriptions of prudence or mere truths about what makes a thing flourish. Theism grounds objective values and duties. On theism, humans have objective value, and DCT theorists posit that humans are duty bound by God's commands. On theism, humans are endowed with a freedom that allows for real moral or immoral action and are held accountable for their choices. The alternatives I have discussed do not appear to have the capacity to ground objective moral values and duties, nor to ground the freedom with which the human may perform a good or evil act. Thus, it appears that each premise of the

argument is true, and since the argument is valid, it appears the argument is sound.

Before claiming victory for Craig's and Copan's arguments, the arguments must overcome several objections. The following chapter will engage with four objections to the moral argument for the God's existence.

Chapter three: The moral argument defended

3.1 Introduction

There are several objections that must be overcome before the theist can claim that the moral argument has succeeded. First, it might be argued that there is some other eternal, necessary abstract object that grounds objective moral values and duties. Second, Plato's Euthyphro dilemma provides many thinkers with reasons to doubt that God is capable of being the grounding for objective moral values and duties. Third, the problem of evil is sometimes thought to be a defeater for the existence of God, and thus, for the moral argument's grounding of objective moral values and duties. Finally, some philosophers have argued that moral responsibility can be severed from factors under our control and thus that free will is not a necessary ingredient for morality. This chapter will analyse these objections.

3.2 God and abstract objects

In his 2013 debate with Brett Kunkle at Weber State University on the moral argument for God's existence, Richard Greene argued that there are various ways to conceive of morality without God.[13] Some of the ways he proposed – virtue theory, ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and Kantian morality – have been examined in the previous chapter and have been found lacking in their ability to provide objective moral values and duties. Greene also mentioned one other possible ground to objective morality. He suggested that if Plato was right and the abstract object "the Good" exists, and if our faculties are able to ascertain metaphysical truths flowing out of "the Good," then God would not be required for objective moral values and duties. If he's right, then Craig's first premise – if God did not exist there would be no objective moral values or duties – would be false and the moral argument for God's existence fails. If objective

[13] This debate, moderated by the author, may be viewed at https://vimeo.com/63795886 (accessed 10/7/20).

morality can be grounded in an abstract object independent of God, then the moral argument in its deductive form appears to have been defeated.

Jerry Walls and David Baggett have recently reformulated the moral argument in the form of an abductive argument in their book *God and Cosmos* (Baggett and Walls 2016). If the deductive argument for God's existence from objective moral values and duties were to fail, one could follow Baggett and Walls in finding God's existence as the inference to the best explanation of objective moral duties and values. However, I do not believe Greene's alternative theory for grounding objective moral values and duties provides a defeater for the first premise of Craig's argument.

For an abstract object like "the Good" to be a threat to the moral argument advanced by Craig, one must show that objective moral values and duties obtain in our world and that they are not dependent on God. Of course, one way to argue thusly might be to attempt to prove both that God does not exist and that in our world objective morality obtains. The argument from evil and suffering in the world is perhaps the strongest argument in favour of God's non-existence, and that argument will be touched on later in this chapter. However, the objector to the first premise of the moral argument for God's existence need not prove God does not exist. Indeed, the objector need not even propose possible worlds where God does not exist. Many theists would not grant this as possible as God is often thought to be a necessary being (existing in every possible world).[1] Instead, the objector to the moral argument needs only to argue that even if God exists it is possible that objective morality exists independently of God. If successful, this objector would have a defeater for Craig's moral argument for God's existence.

In his book *Beyond the control of God?,* Paul Gould reports that traditional theists endorse the view that God is a necessary being who does not depend on

[1] Parrish (1997) makes a strong case that there are no a priori grounds to reject God's logically necessary existence and that the modal version of the ontological argument provides a good reason to affirm God's logically necessary existence. Further, Parrish argues that there are only three basic worldviews: 1) the universe is a brute fact, 2) the universe is necessary, 3) God is a necessary being. Given these three options, Parrish makes a powerful abductive case for God being necessary.

anything distinct from himself for his existing, and on whose creative activity everything distinct from him depends (Gould 2014:2). Gould dubs this thesis the aseity-sovereignty doctrine (AD). Philosophers and theologians have grappled with the place of abstract objects. If AD is true, then it seems abstract objects either do not exist, which is sometimes called anti-realism, or they are dependent on God in some way. The absolute creationist and the divine conceptualist each attempt to show how abstract objects could depend on God in a meaningful way. The absolute creationist supposes that abstract objects, while possibly eternal and necessary, are created by God and so dependent on him (Craig 2017:121). The divine conceptualist, on the other hand, holds that what we think of as abstract objects are actually mental objects in God's mind (p. 165). These views are not without difficulty, but they also each show some promise in showing how abstract objects, if they exist at all, could be seen to depend on God. If "the Good" is ultimately created by God, or exists ultimately in the mind of God, then the first premise of Craig's argument has not been undercut by the existence of what we think of as abstract objects.

However, some thinkers have supposed that at least some abstract objects could exist wholly distinct from God and could thus be independent of him. If abstract objects obtain in this way, it may be possible for the objector to suppose we inhabit a world in which moral values and duties exist as abstract objects, thus grounding moral values and duties in something outside human subjects but not dependent on God. If true, this situation appears to undercut the first premise of modern versions of the moral argument for God's existence, so this objection deserves careful attention. Analysis of this objection will proceed around two loci of thought. First, anti-realism about abstract objects seems to be a better explanation of the world than contemporary Platonism's "realism" regarding abstract objects.[2] Second, even if an abstract object of moral values or duties exists independent of God, it could not be the final ground for objective

[2] As William Lane Craig (2016:3.) points out, contemporary Platonism differs from classical Platonism in that contemporary Platonism takes abstract objects to be causally unrelated to the concrete world. Further, Plato thought physical objects "participate in ideal objects," while contemporary Platonists tend to distance themselves from Plato's cosmology while holding on to the concept of uncreated abstract objects.

moral values in humans. Before diving into a discussion of those two topics, we will first turn to defining realism and anti-realism.

3.2.1 Realism and anti-realism

Anti-realism, as used in this work, is the view that abstract objects do not exist. The realist, on the other hand, thinks that abstract objects really do exist. Why think abstract objects exist in the first place? One of the oldest arguments in favour of abstract objects is that abstract objects provide a good solution to the problem of the "one and the many". In our world there appear to be individuals that cannot be in more than one place at a time. For example, the computer I am typing on is identical to no other computer. This computer is not multi-exemplifiable. There may be similar items in the world, but this computer is distinct in place, time, and in other respects. As I look around me presently, I also see that other distinct objects share a quality this computer exemplifies. This computer is a grey metallic colour. As it turns out, lots of things around me also exemplify that quality. The realist will argue that the grey metallic colour which is able to be exemplified in different places at the same time is a universal abstract object which is present in each instance of its appearing. Further, this computer is like other computers that share a similar shape and function. Concrete objects cannot be multiply instantiated, so the anti-realist faces a problem with objects that appear to be multiply instantiable. The colour of this computer is found in multiple places at the same time. The computer itself bears a striking resemblance to other computers. Computers seem to share some properties or set of properties. If two concrete computers are both exemplifying some universal "Computer," then anti-realism has met its doom. This has led Paul Gould to see that one of the central concerns for the anti-realist is the "problem of universals" (Gould 2014:2).

The realist believes each instance of a quality, or property, is exemplifying a universal abstract object. Some realist philosophers have supposed that these abstract objects may exist as various constituent entities in the mind of God (divine conceptualism) or have been created by God in some way (absolute

creation, theistic activism). As stated previously, if these accounts are true, then the moral argument remains secure, for the abstract objects that ground objective morality depend on God. If, on the other hand, abstract objects exist distinct from God and do not depend on him, and if objective morality is grounded in such an abstract object, then the moral argument for God's existence will have been unsuccessful.

3.2.2 The main arguments for realism

The problem of multiple instantiation can be a vexing problem and may have pushed some theists into the divine conceptualist, absolute creationist, and theistic activism camps. The same problem may also have led some to adopt full-blown Platonism. However, there seems to be no good reason to adopt these positions, as anti-realism avoids several difficulties entailed by realism while remaining open to various solutions to the problem of universals.

It seems that the realist's claim that abstract objects exist proves too much. Both an apple and a fire engine are red. The realist insists that to make sense of this multiple instantiation of "red," there must exist some abstract object "Red" that is present in both the apple and the fire truck. "Red" is thought to be a thing that both particulars share or exemplify. If there are 10,000 million colours the human eye can see, then I suppose the Platonist is committed to at least that many abstract objects. But, if two objects share the property of "being speckled red and blackly", are we then committed to another abstract object "Speckled Red and Blackly"? Even if one believes the colours are merely an instantiation of the forms of those colours, any two objects that share a speckled pattern appear to be instantiating some new universal relating to shapes. Even still, imagine two objects each bearing a pattern. Suppose one is a green ball having alternating circles and squares forming a pattern that overlays the ball. Suppose the other object is a red couch having a pattern consisting of alternating triangles and hexagons. In looking at the objects we notice that the shapes and colours are all different, yet there is something else that instantiated in both objects, namely the pattern of two alternating shapes. The pattern would thus be another example of

an abstract object, and such patterns could be constructed *ad nauseam*. It would appear, then, that on the realist conception of reality there exists an extraordinarily large number of abstract objects, for there is an enormous number of ways two things could be patterned. This is quite an extravagant metaphysical claim that I believe renders Platonism very implausible.

Further, there are innumerable other relations in which things can stand. Two objects can each stand in a "larger than" relation. The Platonist is now committed to a "larger than" abstract object. But we might also see that one object is twice the size of another, and that this relation is also exemplified in other objects as well. Thus, we now need this relation as an abstract object. This opens the door to another infinite number of abstract objects, as two objects may both exemplify the property of being three, four, five times larger than another object. One could again multiply these relations *ad nauseam*. Still further, there is a huge number of smells, sounds, textures, or combinations which realists must suppose exist in some abstract object. In fact, there seems to be no limit to the number of sides an object could have, and so there appears to be an infinite number of shapes. While the anti-realist will assent to the potential infinite number of shapes, patterns, numbers, and relations, she is not committed to the ontological reality of each of those in any actual sense as the realist is. The realist is saddled with this Platonic horde, while the anti-realist is not.

This problem is further compounded by an objection to realism known as the "hierarchy of exemplification of properties argument" (Moreland 2001). The realist claim is that the sentence "*x* is a chair" really means "*x* exemplifies chairness". But if several objects, including *x*, each have it in common that they exemplify chariness, then it seems "*x* is a chair" really means, "*x* exemplifies the exemplification of chariness". It appears there is a vicious and infinite regress at play. The realist must claim that *x* does not exemplify the exemplification of chairness, but rather, that each object each exemplifies chairness. However, do not *x* and each of the other objects now both share a property of "exemplifying chairness"? It seems so, and so both chair *x* and chair *y* do in fact seem to share this new universal of "exemplifying the property of exemplifying chairness" and so "*x* is a chair" does imply (provided there are other exemplifications of

chairness) that "*x* exemplifies the exemplification of chairness". Of course, one might see that objects *x* and *y* both hold this property, and that objects *q* and *r* also both hold that property, which then requires still another universal property common to *x*, *y*, *q*, and *r.* This regression does appear both vicious and infinite.

Still worse, numbers and sets of numbers are paradigmatic examples of abstract objects (Craig 2017:7). If numbers exist as abstract objects, then there exists an infinite number of abstract objects. One must then add to that sets of numbers such as all the prime numbers, all the even numbers, and all the numbers that rhyme with "fate". Each of these sets contains another infinite number of abstract objects.

Philosophically, believing in an actual infinite of abstract objects is bankrupt. William Lane Craig has advanced several arguments against believing that an actual infinite number of things could exist. He points out that an actual infinite would introduce counterintuitive absurdities (Craig 1994:95; see also Moreland and Craig 2003:471–75). To illustrate such absurdities, Craig points to German mathematician David Hilbert's famous hotel example. In Hilbert's hotel, we are asked to imagine a hotel with an actual infinite number of rooms. We are also called on to suppose that all the rooms are full. A new guest arrives and asks for a room. While there are no vacancies, all the front desk has to do is ask each guest to move one room down, and because there is an infinite number of rooms, this action will free up the first room for the new arrival. This same situation could repeat an infinite number of times and while an infinite number of new guests has now been checked in, the number of guests at the hotel has remained the same. Further, if all the guests in odd-numbered rooms checked out, the number of guests would still remain the same. In this case, while an infinite number of guests have checked out, there remain an infinite number of guests. This is clearly absurd.

We can see the absurdity of abstract objects by placing them into Hilbert's hotel. Each abstract object occupies a room. Suppose then that a neurotic front desk worker kicks out all the abstract objects occupying a prime numbered room. Oddly, after this discriminatory act, there remains the same number of

abstract objects as before still checked into the hotel. The hotel is, of course, simply a device illustrating the absurdly strange properties of an actual infinite, and that if an actual infinite number of abstract objects exists, these absurdities could also exist. This should demonstrate that that an actual infinite number of things cannot exist. Thus, an argument against realism could be laid out as follows:

1. Realism with regard to abstract objects entails an actual infinite number of abstract objects.
2. An actual infinite cannot exist.
3. Therefore, realism is false.

The anti-realist can also solve the problem of multiple instantiation of properties without appealing to the existence of abstract objects. One can explain why an apple is red by explaining how a certain wavelength of light is reflected from the surface of the apple and how that wavelength effects our visual system, producing the experience of “being appeared to redly”. One could then repeat that same explanation for all objects that appear to us redly. The anti-realist would use the same sort of explanations for relations as well. One object appears to me as taller than another when its vertical axis extends higher than the object to which it is compared. The relation may be reduced to simple mathematics. This person is 35 units tall, while this person is 33 of the same units tall. The larger-than relation simply describes the situation in which one object extends beyond another in some measurable way.

Further, realism seems to offer no real advantage over anti-realism with regard to the problem of the one and the many. Realism’s explanation that the fire truck is red because it stands in a relation to a “static, nonspatial, causally effete, abstract object” (Craig 2011:310) enjoys no explanatory advantage over anti-realist explanations. It is this lack of explanatory power that led Mark Balaguer to assert, “The One Over Many argument is now widely considered to be a bad argument”.

The realist may abandon the argument for realism from multiple instantiation and still insist that abstract objects are indispensable. That is, mathematical objects seem indispensable because "customary semantics requires that if singular terms (like names, definite descriptions, and demonstrative expressions) fail to refer to any object and if quantifying expressions like 'all' or 'some' do not appropriately delimit the range of objects to which the predicate is ascribed, then the sentences containing such expressions cannot be true" (Craig 2012b:442). If mathematical calculations represented in scientific theories are true, then the objects referred to and quantified over might be thought to exist. This is sometimes called the indispensability argument for abstract objects.

But ought we to think of numbers as abstract objects? Does the number seven exist somewhere? The anti-realist has several options for affirming the truth of mathematical calculations while denying the ontological existence of abstract objects like numbers. In one option, Stephen Yablo's figuralism, mathematical discourse is figurative and ought not be understood to be literally making statements about abstract objects and their relations (Craig 2017:303). Yablo contends that much ordinary talk makes use of existential metaphors. When one speaks of a "lucky streak", for example, one need not be committed to the ontological reality of a real object. Rather, a "lucky streak" is an existential metaphor; an object to which the speaker is not ontologically committed (Craig 2016:168). In a similar way, numbers can be thought of as another example of an existential metaphor in which the terms, while useful for expressing truths about the real world, do not exist in any real way. Figuralism allows objectivity in mathematics and does not carry with it the problematic features of realism addressed above.

Alternatively, neutralists like Jody Azzouni "maintain that the use of singular terms is ontologically neutral" (Craig 2016:129). In ordinary talk, we sometimes use singular terms in this way. Craig notes that we sometimes make statements using singular terms that are not meant to have objects in the world to which they correspond. Several examples of such statements cited by Craig include (p. 130):

- The weather in Atlanta will be hot today.
- The price of the tickets is ten dollars.
- James couldn't pay his mortgage.
- Johnny scored a touchdown in the fourth quarter.

Neutralism's claim is that in these cases (and examples could be multiplied), one is not ontologically committed to abstract objects like "weather", "mortgage", "price", and "touchdown". We may speak of the touchdown Johnny scored in conventional language, even though there is no abstract object of "touchdown" we believe Johnny exemplified. Neutralism claims numbers exist in a similar way. Existential quantifiers need not be seen as ontologically committing, but may simply "facilitate logical inferences" (Craig 2012a:59). It is true that Johnny scored a touchdown, and it is true that 2+2=4, but neither "2" nor "touchdown" exists in a metaphysically heavy sort of way.

Even if one wants to remain a realist about numbers, one can do so without requiring abstract objects. Numbers can be understood to be conceptual, existing in the mind. Numbers can be explained as a collection of units. The number "one" represents an object by itself, and the number "two" represents an object in addition to the first. Mathematics can be thought of as an extension of this basic principle, and the terms need not refer to any existing ontological objects. This conceptualistic approach allows a person to talk about what would be the case if one had four oranges and ate three of them. Mathematics may be understood to express truths, but these truths need not depend on abstract objects, as they may simply be tied to one's thoughts about what would happen in the world of concrete objects in various situations.

It seems then that the two primary arguments for realism regarding abstract objects do not hold up. The problem of multiple instantiation can be deflated by explaining in scientific terms what is meant each time a person says, "the ball is red". This can be done by referencing the ball's absorbing and reflecting various wavelengths of light. Multiple instantiation of redness in the world is not a compelling reason to adopt the realist ontological assay of things. The indispensability argument is not compelling either for, as it turns out, the

ontological existence of objects does seem dispensable even while preserving the truth of mathematics.

3.2.3 Three objections to realism

In the discussion of anti-realism and realism above, we saw several problems for the realist. The realist must struggle to make sense of the vicious regress that seems to be involved with abstract objects, and there are serious philosophical problems with the infinite Platonic horde. There are still three other major objections to realism that can be advanced. Particularly, these objections are known as the epistemological objection, the imperatival objection, and the uniqueness objection.

The epistemological objection stems from the causally effete nature of abstract objects. Abstract objects are thought of as “unrelated to concrete objects” (Craig 2017:78). But then concrete objects seem to be epistemologically cut off from abstract objects, and it is unclear how any information could pass from abstract objects to concrete objects. Plato’s version of the “forms” included an epistemological link to concrete objects in that he proposed the transmigration of the soul in which humans once had access to the forms, and so may recollect them. Contemporary Platonic realism proposes no such cosmology and has thus allowed abstract objects to lose touch with concrete objects. In any case, Plato’s connection of abstract objects with concrete objects does not appear to have been nuanced. It is far from obvious how human souls could gain insights or information from abstract objects or how physical objects or situations could be causally connected to abstract objects.

One might have similar concerns for theism. One may wonder how an immaterial God can be causally connected to the material world. However, in the case of theism, both God and the physical world are concrete objects. Further, mental states do not appear to be reducible to brain states, since mental states have properties brain states do not. For example, brain states do not have the property of being happy, loving, or cheerful, while mental states can have these properties. Mental states can have intentionality, an about-ness to the mental

state. If mental states are not identical to brain states, we have an example of an immaterial concrete object standing in a causal relationship to a material concrete object. While we may not understand the mechanism of this causal relationship – the how question – we can see that it does connect. This, then, can serve as an analogy for the immaterial God's causal connection with the material world. In other words, we see that immaterial and material concrete objects can stand in causal relationships. What remains unknown is whether an abstract object could stand in a causal relationship with a material object. Indeed, I know of no such example.

Further, while the explanation of properties like "redness" has explanatory power, appealing to a ball's "redness" in virtue of its exemplification of an abstract object, "Red," does not seem to provide any explanatory power. A thing's "standing in relation to a static, non-spatial, causally effete, abstract object" does not seem to make an otherwise colourless ball red (Craig 2017:77). As Baggett and Walls have opined, "Free-floating metaphysical items do not have the ontological strength and stability that we think morality must have" (Baggett and Walls 2011:21). Some platonic philosophers have attempted to explain a ball's redness in virtue of an abstract object's supervenience on physical situations. This is simply unintelligible. How is it that an abstract object comes to be attached to physical situations?

Perhaps, one could argue, physical states of affairs cause the abstract object to supervene. Yet physical objects and situations are cut off from the realm of the abstract and cannot pick out abstract objects. Even if they could, it seems unlikely that they would necessarily pick out the right one every time. How could a physical object reach out and causally connect to a transcendent causally isolated abstract object? It is wholly obscure how physical and abstract objects could be related.

Philosopher William Lane Craig responds to a question regarding realism by reminding us that "in view of their causal isolation, knowledge of abstract objects ought to be impossible on Platonism, which would leave us bereft of mathematical knowledge" (Craig 2009). Of course, the same problem would apply to objective moral values and duties. If the final ground for objective

morality is an abstract object, in view of its causal isolation, humans would be epistemically cut off from knowing what is objectively morally right or wrong. An abstract object cannot serve as a grounding for our morality if we are cut off from any apprehension of that object. If, for example, we are morally obligated by an abstract object to put a sticker of the colour *x* (where *x* stands for a particular colour) on all humans, but that moral obligation is grounded in an abstract object to which we have no epistemological access, then the abstract object that gives us that moral duty cannot serve as a grounding for our moral behaviour since it is unknowable. Indeed, epistemic access seems to be a key feature of a full moral theory.

An atheistic Platonic theory of morality would face another problem, as it would be vulnerable to Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism. Alvin Plantinga argues that naturalism is self-defeating because, if our cognitive faculties have evolved by naturalistic processes, then they are aimed not at truth but at survival and so cannot be relied on to produce true beliefs. On theism, God has created humans in his image, and an important part of this image consists in our ability to have knowledge (Plantinga 2011:313). It is natural that God would endow humanity with cognitive faculties that are, for the most part, reliable, if pursuit of truth and knowledge and the like are things God wanted humans to pursue. However, if the atheistic naturalist story is correct and our cognitive faculties have been shaped by natural selection operating through the process of unguided naturalistic evolution, is there any assurance that our cognitive faculties are for the most part reliable? It seems not, for evolution and natural selection would give us low probability that our cognitive faculties produce true beliefs, since our cognitive faculties would be shaped by a process wholly concerned with survival, not the pursuit of truth. Adaptive behaviour, or the neurology that causes the behaviour, is not concerned whether the content determined by that neurology is true, just that it aids survival (Plantinga 2011:339). In this case, atheistic Platonism does not seem to help us discern moral truth, as our cognitive faculties cannot be relied on to produce true beliefs. This would undercut both our belief in atheistic naturalism as well as our moral beliefs, as both beliefs are formed by the same cognitive processes. If someone believes in naturalism and unguided evolution and sees, therefore, that the

probability of his cognitive faculties being reliable is low, then he has a defeater for the reliability of his atheistic naturalism and his moral beliefs.

Further, abstract objects appear to carry no imperative. With regard to objective morality, “the objective moral order presents itself to us in the form of commands with imperatival force, and as obligations, duties and prohibitions imposed on us” (Moreland 2009:146). This imposes upon us a sense that we are accountable for these duties. “It is hard to see how there can be imperatival force if there is not a good God with a will who stands behind the moral law”. A causally effete abstract object imposes no obligation to exemplify it, nor can it engender praise or blame when it is exemplified or not, and so it appears there is no basis for duties on realism. Even if abstract objects did lay obligations on humans, it is not clear why some abstract objects would have obligations attached while others would not. “Vice, greed, hatred would also exist on their own as abstractions, so why are we obligated to love, generosity and virtue but not these?” (Craig 2010a:137).

Perhaps one could conceive of abstract objects as exemplifiable but not obligating. This would seem to make morality unintelligible. It is unclear what it would mean for a moral value like “justice” to simply exist. Moral values appear to be properties of persons, and it is unintelligible that such an object could exist in abstraction. Even if abstract objects exist, they seem to offer no explanation as to why or how they were ever exemplified in the first place or what, if anything, the abstract object would have to do with humans (Moreland 2009:147). Indeed, William Lane Craig asks, “What would it be like, in the absence of any people, that justice itself exists?” (Craig 2010a:137). At best, a person who understood some abstract moral object like “goodness” supervening on some physical situation might find in themselves a desire to pursue that “goodness” relationship. Thus, not only is it difficult to make sense of moral values on Platonism, but moral duties are equally as mystifying. Moral obligations, on moral Platonism, do not appear to have binding force. They seem to be conditional. That is, if one is concerned with goodness, then that person should pursue physical situations in which “goodness” supervenes. Of course, what if a person is unconcerned with “goodness”? There does not seem to be

any obligation to pursue that abstract object. Nor does there seem to be a prohibition against pursuing “badness”. This undermines objective moral duties, as there ends up being no unconditional moral duties, and moral duties become wholly subjective – dependent on the whims of the acting subject’s desires. Theism, on the other hand, is able to produce unconditional moral obligations in the shape of God’s commands.

Moral values seem to be unintelligible as abstract objects by themselves, and it is improbable that humankind would come to track abstract objects through evolution (Craig 2010a:137). If there is no God and if evolution is the efficient cause for the human race, “it is fantastically improbable that the blind evolutionary process should spit forth exactly those kinds of creatures that align with the existence of this realm of abstract values,” since the natural world of concrete objects is wholly cut off from the realm of abstract objects (Craig 2010b).

These problems make it difficult to see how abstract objects could be the basis for objective moral values and duties if they exist independent of God. Of course, God, or something like God, could be thought of as expressing abstract objects to us and holding us accountable to exemplify the abstract objects relevant for morality, thus bypassing the epistemological and imperatival objections. However, this just pushes the problem one step back, as the same objections now beset God. If abstract objects exist and are independent of God, who is a concrete particular, how does God come to interact with or know abstract objects in order to communicate them to us? Further, it is unclear why God would elevate some abstract objects to come to have imperative force such that we are accountable to him for exemplifying them or not exemplifying them while others are left to be exemplified or not, with no accountability. If God’s nature is not the standard for the Good, any decisions he makes regarding what to hold us accountable to exemplify seems arbitrary. If God is simply a middleman who chooses some abstract objects to impose on humanity, there seems to be no reason why he could not have chosen to hold us accountable to vice and greed rather than virtue and generosity. God may know that humans who live in accord with certain abstract objects while avoiding others will thrive,

but it is hard to see why it would be obligatory to promote thriving. Again, if both thriving and not thriving are abstract objects, why would one be obligatory and the other not? One might argue that thriving is obligatory just if God commands the exemplification of that abstract object and commands the non-exemplification of the other, but again, this seems arbitrary. Could God have reversed things and commanded the exemplification of non-thriving? Since God, in this hypothetical world, is not the standard for good but merely commands the exemplification of some abstract objects while commanding the non-exemplification of others, it seems as though this moral scenario cannot escape the arbitrariness objection. That is, morality on this model becomes purely arbitrary. This cuts against our most basic moral intuitions, as we cannot fathom a world in which rape and torturing innocent babies for fun were obligatory. This model preserves a sort of objective morality and accountability, but it is undercut by the arbitrariness of the commands of this hypothetical God.

The last objection to realism to be analysed is known as the uniqueness objection. This objection notes that one does not need numbers to exist in abstraction in order to do mathematics. Craig notes, “[V]irtually anything can fill the role of a mathematical object, so long as it stands in the right relations with other objects, since that's all that's needed for mathematical truth” (Craig 2009). Thus, one need not be committed to the existence of a unique sequence of abstract objects which make up the series of natural numbers. Numbers could simply be “the places in the ordinal structure into which any objects can be slotted”. An anti-realist could argue there needn’t really be an object which is the number 3, for example; rather, there is just the third place in this series which can be filled by any object. If this is true, then abstracts objects do in fact appear to be dispensable.

3.2.4 Summary of God and abstract objects

So far, we have seen that anti-realism is able to overcome the two main arguments for adopting realism with regard to abstract objects. The anti-realist has good responses to the problem of the one and the many as well as the indispensability argument, and thus realism does not appear to be necessary.

The anti-realist position is actually preferable because it may eschew the platonic horde, whereas realists appear to be committed to an actual infinite number of objects. Even if abstract objects did exist, they would not be sufficient for grounding the kind of objective morality that needs explaining. It seems that, at best, a world with a God and abstract objects that exist independently from God could work together to produce obligations that are objective for humans, but that they would remain arbitrary. However, if one conceives of abstract objects as dependent on God, then one may be able to escape the arbitrariness objection. In that case, however, the moral argument appears to be unaffected by abstract objects.

3.3 Biblical theism and abstract objects

Having addressed several philosophical reasons for eschewing the realist ontological assay of things, I now turn to addressing how the biblical theologian should assess this debate. As I hope will become clear, the biblical data does seem to point in one direction in this debate with some implications for how the theist committed to biblical data ought to conceive of abstract objects, if they exist at all.

Peter van Inwagen sees no contradiction in believing that God is the creator of “all things” and that abstract objects, if they exist, exist eternally and uncreated. He believes that when the Bible says God is the creator of all things, it means things like “seas and mountains and storms and the sun and the moon and galaxies and space and time and electromagnetic radiation and neutrinos and dark energy and angels and human souls” (van Inwagen 2015:290). What van Inwagen does not think the Bible is talking about are things like “propositions and attributes and numbers…and shapes”. He believes the problem lies in imprecise use of language. For example, when a person says, “We sold everything in the store today,” he doesn't likely mean he sold the floor tiles and counters. He means he sold all the things which were for sale. Similarly, van Inwagen maintains that when Jesus says, “with God all things are possible,” Jesus does not mean that God can do logically impossible things like create a

square circle. In the same vein, van Inwagen believes that God creates everything that needs to be created, but that some abstract objects could be uncreated.

In the Bible, we have several statements that seem to imply God's aseity. The term "aseity" is derived from the Latin *a se* meaning "from oneself" (Grenz 1999). The doctrine of divine aseity declares God to depend on nothing for his existence. God's self-existence does not seem to be a property he exemplifies but is instead a description of what God has been for eternity. This means God does not depend on abstract objects for his properties. On realism, "deity is an abstract object existing independently of God, to which God stands in the relation of exemplification or instantiation" (Craig 2016:43). If this were the case, God would be divine in virtue of his standing in an exemplification relation to the abstract object of "Deity". This abstract object, or the realm of abstract objects, would then be the ultimate reality, not God. Still worse, since aseity is essential to deity, "it turns out that God does not exemplify deity after all. Since aseity is essential to deity and God, on Platonism, does not exist *a se*, it turns out that God does not exist". The biblical witness does not allow for these conclusions. In what follows, we will see biblical evidence that God exists *a se* and that everything other than God that exists depends on him for its existence.

3.3.1 Biblical evidence

When biblical theologians claim God exists *a se*, they do not mean that God is a self-caused being. The notion of a self-caused being is incoherent (Parrish 1997:24). Instead the theologian means that God is uncaused. That is, it has never been the case that the proposition, "God does not exist," is true. Jesus affirmed this truth when declaring that God the Father has life "in himself" (Jn. 5:26). God alone has life in this way and all other created things are derived creatures (Carson 1991:256).

In contrast to the Babylonian and Canaanite creation myths, which give a back story serving as a "narrative justification for the preeminence" (Longman 2016:30) of their gods, Marduk and Baal, the biblical narrative begins with the

radical assertion that God is the creator of everything (p. 33). Egyptian conceptions of creation involve "the evolution of gods and goddesses from the primeval chaos". While creation myths in the ancient Near East conceive gods as active in creation, these rival mythical creators need help from others and make use of pre-existing materials to create. The biblical God does neither. Rather, God creates out of nothing (Longman 2016:33). There is no pre-existing material, no helpers, and no conflict.[14]

This is perhaps the most fundamental truth of the Bible. God, and no other, created all things that began to exist. God reveals himself to be "sovereign, self-sufficient, and supreme" (Longman 2016:39). God creates all that exists out of nothing, that is, *ex nihilo*. "Out of nothing" implies that "God alone is the source of all that exists" (Migliore 1991:84). God does not simply impose order on chaotic and pre-existing matter, like the craftsman of Plato's *Timaeus*. God exists uncaused, and it is on him that everything else that exists radically and totally depends (p. 85).

This truth is espoused in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul, who affirms that "by [the divine Son of God] all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:16–17). [15] Christ is declared to be the creator and sustainer of all that has come into existence. Paul takes pains, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, to ensure that readers understand that there is no other existing thing that does not completely depend on God for its

[14] John Walton argues that creation, in the ancient Israelite view, is more about God's order and purpose for the world rather than on the material stuff from which the world is made (Walton 2017:81). Still, Walton finds that the ancient Israelites conception of God's role in creation departs from other Near Eastern views, which hold that gods brought order from static elements of the cosmos. Ancient Israel, by contrast, "considered Yahweh as the initiator of these static elements as well as the one who regulated them through his decrees (p. 81)." While Walton does not use the term "*ex nihilo*" (out of nothing), other Old Testament scholars and philosophers do use that term as a description of God's creative act (e.g. Von Rad 1972:49; Sailhamer 1990:20–23; Copan and Craig 2002:95). Longman III, believes the Bible to "clearly teach that God created everything," and that "the biblical doctrine of creation from nothing stands secure (Longman 2019:50)."

[15] All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the ESV.

beginning and continued existence. While the Apostle may not have had abstract objects in mind at the time he was writing, the merisms he uses are idiomatic, covering every object or force other than God. A merism is a "construction in which two elements function together to indicate a single whole: in this case, the created order, the universe" (Moo 2008:47). This language directs us back to Genesis 1:1, where God is said to be the creator of heavens and the earth. All created things find their existence in/by (*en*) Christ, and "Christ stands at the beginning of creation as the one *through (dia)* whom all things were created". Still further, all created things are to/for (*eis*) Christ. Paul says that "all things" (*ta panta*) are created *en, dia* and *eis* Christ. This serves to illustrate that there is absolutely nothing that does not depend on God for its being. Christ existed prior to anything being created, and he is the creator of everything that has come into being. As William Lane Craig explains, Paul's intention "is that the domain of his quantifiers be unrestricted" (Craig, 2016:26). God is the everlasting God who creates everything other than himself (Isa. 40:28, 42:5, 45:18; Amos 4:13; Rom. 1:25).

Paul includes this line of thinking as a doxology in Romans 11:36, saying, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (ESV). Here Paul claims all things (*ta panta*) are from (*ek*), through (*dia*) and to (*eis*) God alone. In stacking these three prepositions, "Paul is saying something like that God authored all things, is the necessary agency through which they occur, and in the end all these things will fulfil his purposes" (Keener 2009:140). Far from God being one existing thing among others, God is understood as the cause and source of all things (Kruse 2012:459).

The Apostle John makes a similar observation in John 1:1–3. For John to tell the story of Jesus, he does not start at the birth of Jesus from the virgin Mary. Instead he uses the phrase "In the beginning", which "echoes the opening phrase of the Hebrew Bible (Gen. 1:1) and establishes a canonical link between the first words of the OT scriptures and [John's] gospel" (Köstenberger 2009:25). John 1:1–3 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made". This is an

emphatic statement that “everything owes its existence to [Christ]” (Köstenberger 2009:30). All things (*panta)* that exist, other than God, owe their coming into existence to Christ. In a common Johannine way, John underscores this point by restating the same point in the negative saying, “without him was not anything made that was made” (Jn. 1:3; cf. Köstenberger 2009:30). The term for “made” is the word *egeneto* which is “used consistently to describe creation in the LXX of Gen. 1” (Brown 1966:6). In a way that is similar to Colossians 1:16, all things are said to be created in and through Christ. These verses testify that Jesus, the uncreated divine Logos, is antecedent to the creation of all things.

More than simply asserting that God is the maker of all that has come into existence, the biblical witness also declares God’s distinct mode of being. In Psalm 90:2, the psalmist declares the “transcendence and eternity of God” (Miller 1986:126): “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God”. God is understood as the eternal source of all created things. He has always been there, even before the earth and everything was brought into being by him (Longman 2014:328). Isaiah 40:28 reiterates this fact, saying, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable”. God is “everlasting,” meaning “there is no time when he is not” (Motyer 1999:282).

The above serves to demonstrate that the biblical theologian committed to the truthfulness of the biblical witness ought to believe abstract objects either do not exist or, if they do, are completely dependent on God. God alone is the uncreated creator of all that has come into being.

3.4 The Euthyphro dilemma

As mentioned in the introduction, the “Euthyphro dilemma” refers to Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. In the dialogue, Socrates encounters a man named Euthyphro outside of a courtroom. Socrates learns that Euthyphro plans to charge his own father with a capital offence. Socrates wonders how Euthyphro

could bring such an indictment unless he was sure he would not be acting against the gods by making such an accusation against his father. Euthyphro claims to have knowledge of what pleases the gods and does not please them. Socrates, using his now famous “Socratic method”, begins questioning Euthyphro in order to draw this knowledge out of him. Eventually, Euthyphro claims that what all the gods love is holy and that what all the gods hate is unholy. It is in response to this claim that Socrates asks his famous question, “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” (Plato 1966:1:10a). This question presents Euthyphro with a puzzling question in the form of a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is untenable for Euthyphro because it makes holiness independent from the gods, which is exactly what Euthyphro had seemed to want to avoid by grounding what is holy in what the gods love. In this case, holiness would be a property the gods recognize and would not originate in their will. This removes the gods from their pride of place as the grounding for good and holy action. Rather than being the grounding for good and holy deeds, the gods would serve merely as a pointer to some deeper grounding for moral goodness. Assenting to the second horn of the dilemma is tantamount to claiming that holy things are just those things loved by the gods. This too is untenable because it makes holiness arbitrary. Had the gods loved murder, rape, and torture, then those seemingly heinous acts would have been holy.

One view of how God might ground morality is that “moral goodness is what God approves of” (Kretzmann 1999:421). If God is thought to ground objective moral values and duties in this way, a Socratic questioner might ask, “Does God approve of moral values and duties just because they are morally right, or are actions morally good just because God approves of them?” In this case, if the theist believes God approves of what is already morally good, it is hard to see how God grounds moral values since the moral goodness or value is already grounded in something else prior to God’s approval. God, in this account, is not essential to morality. This viewpoint is sometimes called a *guided will* theory of the good (Baggett and Walls 2011:33). On the other hand, if the theist believes that God’s approval is what makes an act good, then it seems that absolutely

any act could be morally right in virtue of God's commanding or approval of it. This theory is often called "voluntarism" or *pure will* theory of the good. This seems to make morality arbitrary. Does the Euthyphro dilemma give the theist cause to abandon supposing that God grounds objective moral values and duties?

A non-voluntaristic theory of the good ends up locating the authority of morality outside of God and so robs the moral argument of its power. Morality might depend on God in some communicative sense, but God is not the ultimate grounding of moral goodness in a guided will theory of moral goodness. God can be thought to be the source of a human's moral knowledge, but God is not the source of moral values and duties themselves.

The voluntarist account has numerous problems as well. First, the voluntaristic account makes it hard to see how God's commands could be normative for any reason other than prudential fear of consequences. His authority does not seem to amount to much more than an appeal to "might makes right" (Baggett and Walls 2001:34).

Second, on the voluntaristic theory, morality seems to become arbitrary, as God may not have any reasons for commanding one thing over another. If God did have reasons, the voluntarist position would seem to collapse into the guided will theory of morality. But most theists are not comfortable with morality being arbitrary, as it seems to imply that God could have obligated us to enjoin hate or kill innocent people for no reason (Baggett and Walls 2001:34). But this means that calling God good is vacuous since his "goodness" would be compatible with just any commands.

Third, as Patrick Nowell-Smith has pointed out, on the voluntaristic position, "religious morality is infantile" (Nowell-Smith 1999:403). God's commanding what we must do or not do seems to rob humans of the dignity to think carefully through issues on their own. Children are taught right and wrong from authorities whereas adults, it seems, have powers of moral reasoning, and it would be infantile to set those powers aside and rely simply on the (apparently arbitrary)

commands of God. This is sometimes called the “autonomy objection” (Baggett and Walls 2011:35).

Given the above problems, neither the guided will nor voluntarist accounts of God’s grounding of objective morality seems appealing. However, these are not the only options. Kretzmann notes that in the theistic tradition, God is thought to be a perfect being who is identical with perfect goodness itself (Kretzmann 1999:426). In this case, God’s approving what is good need not involve any principle independent of God. Indeed, Baggett and Walls point out that what made Euthyphro so vulnerable to criticism in the dialogue with Socrates was his belief in morally deficient gods (Baggett and Walls 2011:50). Qualifying as God, in the classical theistic sense, requires that the being in question is good. In this view, God just *is* the ultimate good. If moral truths are reflective of who God is necessarily and essentially, then the “Euthyphro dilemma is effectively defused and the moral argument for God’s existence accordingly gains strength” (p. 93). The Euthyphro problem helps one see the sort of God that is required if morality is to have a solid ontological grounding. Morality, if it is to have a sure footing, will be grounded in the nature of a good God. God’s commands then can flow from God’s good character, and thus do not point to a deeper reality beyond God, and God’s commands, far from being arbitrary, are constrained by God’s goodness.

God is the supreme authority on matters of goodness, justice, and all moral categories, and so his commands provide perfect guidance in moral matters. While some defenders of the divine command theory (DCT) may conclude that only God’s commands constitute our moral duties, others stress that although all objective moral values and duties are ultimately grounded in God’s character, not every moral commitment is grounded in a direct command of God. Some ethicists argue that while God’s commands certainly obligate humans, God may have other ways of communicating moral obligations. Such ways may include natural law, inclinations, conscience, ecclesiastical bodies, the tutelage of others, or certain social requirements (Evans 2013:39–40).

The autonomy objection appears to fail in two respects, then. First, the divine-human gap seems infinitely greater than the parent-child gap with regard to cognitive function. While children grow up and eventually reach similar reasoning heights as their parents, humans may well never attain the same clarity in moral reasoning or cognitive functioning as God, and thus the analogy fails. Further, it may also be that while God's commands obligate humans, his gift of reason and cognition indicate that he expects us to weigh moral reasons and make choices based on competing moral claims, which is anything but infantile.

3.4.1 Summary of the Euthyphro dilemma argument

In this section I showed that the criticisms that follow from both guided will and voluntarist positions regarding God's commands need not affect theism because theism regards God's own nature and character as the ultimate source for moral goodness. God himself is the good, so moral truths are not arbitrary, as the obligations that flow from his nature are constrained by his goodness and not from a source independent of God's own self. Further, DCT is not committed necessarily to supposing that all of our obligations are grounded in direct commands, and so there may be other factors that contribute to our moral obligations, which make humans dignified in their moral reasoning, thus evading the autonomy objection.

The next chapter presents a case for DCT built upon the foundation of God's goodness. In that chapter, I will return to the Euthyphro dilemma, showing that it does not constitute an intractable problem for DCT. Further, in that chapter, biblical data regarding morality and God's commands will be connected to draw together a full divine command theory that will be compatible with the moral argument for God's existence. Before turning our attention to that matter, there are two more objections that need to be discussed.

3.5 The problem of evil

It is not within the scope of this project to attempt anything like a full treatment of the problem of evil. Still, it does seem incumbent on those arguing for God's existence based on the reality of objective moral values and duties at least to provide reasons why the problem of evil ought not to be considered a defeater for the argument. While the problem of evil "stands as a counter point to the other traditional theistic arguments, it stands most directly opposed to the moral argument" (Baggett and Walls 2011:144).

There are two reasons why the problem of evil appears to derail the moral argument. First, as one of the primary arguments against God's existence, if successful, it would provide a direct defeater for the conclusion of the moral argument for God's existence. Second, God allowing evil and suffering is often thought of as a counterargument against God's perfect goodness, which strikes at the heart of a DCT that argues God's nature is the ultimate good. In what follows, I will argue that the argument, as it is sometimes presented, is self-refuting, that the more nuanced logical problem evaporates on a closer analysis, and that the evidential problem of evil provides no justification for atheism.

3.5.1 The self-refuting nature of some arguments against God from evil

In April of 2008, I had the privilege of engaging Mark Boyd, co-founder of the Central Valley Alliance of Atheists and Skeptics, in a public debate at Fresno Pacific University. The subject of the debate was the existence of God. I argued that there are numerous phenomena and states of affairs that exist that could not be if God does not exist. The phenomena and states of affairs that I pointed toward were the fact that something exists rather than nothing, the existence of real freedom of human persons, the existence of human consciousness, and the existence of objective moral values and duties.

Boyd's presentation was based on what he perceived to be several logical contradictions with the theistic concept of God. In the final analysis, his argument boiled down to the argument of evil. Taking my cue from William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland, I responded in three ways (Craig and Moreland 2003:536–553).

First, evil would only count as a defeater for God's existence if God had no morally sufficient reason for allowing evil. Humans, because we are finite, are not in a good position to assess the probability of whether God has a morally sufficient reason for the evils that occur, and so we can't know if there is needless suffering. Secondly, the Christian faith includes doctrines that increase the probability of the coexistence of God and evil. These doctrines include the following: a) the chief purpose of life is not happiness per se, but the knowledge of God, b) humankind is in a state of rebellion against God and his purpose, c) in the Christian view, this life is not all there is, d) eternal life with God is an immeasurable good that eclipses all evil and suffering one might undergo in this earthly life. Lastly, if God does not exist, then objective moral values—real good and real evil—do not exist. If that were the case, there would be no problem of evil. However, we know that real evil exists, and thus there is real right and wrong, which points us to God.

My primary point was that if the problem of evil were successful, it would undercut its own conclusion—namely that God does not exist—because the only way to arrive at real moral good and evil is if objective moral values and duties exist, and as I've highlighted above, there does not seem to be any atheistic way to ground objective values and duties without God. Far from operating as a defeater for Christian theism, the problem of evil actually supplies evidence for the moral argument.

3.5.2 The logical problem of evil

But still, the philosopher might insist that God's goodness is logically incompatible with evil. While the argument from evil has a long history, the logical problem of evil levelled against traditional Christian theism was largely dispatched after Alvin Plantinga penned his potent little book, *God, freedom*, *and evil* (Plantinga 1977). In that work, Plantinga was not content to show that there is no contradiction in maintaining both that God, as he is classically defined, exists – possessing omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, etc. – and that evil also exists (Pankratz 2014). Indeed, Plantinga takes the argument one large step forward by also demonstrating that those two propositions are

implicitly consistent. He does not simply accept them as consistent because they are not shown to be otherwise; instead, he labours to show they *are* consistent in the broadly logical sense.

Plantinga essentially argues that though God is omnipotent, there are possible worlds he cannot create. God can create creatures that are significantly free and capable of moral good, but he cannot, at the same time, cause or determine them to do what is right (Plantinga 1977:30). Thus, while there are possible worlds that contain moral good and no evil, God cannot make it be the case that those worlds obtain while also maintaining creatures' free will. This is due to the fact that God cannot grant a person libertarian freedom while at the same time determining a person's actions.

For example, there are possible worlds where Dan becomes a member of the LDS Church following his first encounter with two zealous missionaries. Suppose after a lively and enlightening discussion, Elder Minegar shares with Dan that he knows the LDS church is true, and he asks Dan to pray and ask God to reveal to him that the LDS Church is the true church. Dan informs the young elder that, while he prays to God often and seeks His wisdom, there are some things he doesn't need to pray about, and that becoming an LDS member is one such thing. That evening, after a long day of proselytizing, Elder Minegar thinks, "If Dan had accepted my challenge to pray and ask God if the LDS Church is true, he would have become a Mormon". Let's call the state of affairs in which Dan agrees to pray and ask God if the LDS Church is true "*S*". Suppose also that if *S* had obtained, Dan would not have become an LDS member. *S* then includes the state of affairs consisting of Dan praying and asking God if the LDS Church is true, and everything else being as much as possible like the conditions that did obtain. In that state of affairs, Dan is free to become LDS or not. If *S* had obtained, one of these following conditionals would then be true:

(1) If the state of affairs *S* had obtained, Dan would have become LDS.

(2) If the state of affairs S had obtained, Dan would not have become LDS.

Each of these options is a possible world, and so we can see that there are possible worlds in which *S* obtains and Dan becomes an LDS member, and

possible worlds in which *S* obtains and Dan does not become an LDS member. *S* does not entail either Dan's becoming or not becoming LDS. One of the above conditionals is true, and in that case, the other represents a possible world God could not have created (Plantinga 1977:41). If (2) were true, then it would be impossible for God to create a world in which *S* obtains, in which Dan is free either to become an LDS member or not to become an LDS member, and in which Dan becomes LDS.

Plantinga relates this sort of possible world reasoning to the problem of evil by introducing the concept of transworld depravity. For Plantinga, transworld depravity is a "condition" in which the affected person will freely make bad moral choices in the actual world. God cannot create an actual world for a transworldly depraved person where he or she will make only good moral decisions, while at the same time allowing him or her to be significantly free (able to make significant moral decisions). If Susan would steal $5 dollars from her mom's purse if a state of affairs *S'* obtains, then God could not create a world in which *S'* obtains and Susan does not steal the money, though that would be a possible world.

An essential property is a property one has just if there is no world in which one exists and lacks it. Suppose that every person suffers from transworld depravity. To create a person, then, would include instantiating essences suffering from transworld depravity. If every essence created by God suffers from transworld depravity, then "no matter which essences God instantiates, the resulting persons, if free with respect to morally significant actions, would always perform at least some wrong actions" (Plantinga 1977:51). From this one ought to conclude that while there are possible worlds in which free people make only good moral choices, it is not possible for God to create those worlds supposing people are transworldly depraved. Thus, the classically defined God could not create a world containing moral good without that same world containing moral evil. This means that, granted transworld depravity, creating a world that contains moral good *entails* the proposition: Evil exists. In this case, the logical problem of evil has not succeeded in eliminating either God's existence or classically defined attributes.

Put more formally, we can say:

(1) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent.

(2) It was not within God's power to create a world containing moral good but not moral evil.

(3) God created a world containing moral good.

(4) There is evil.

Given our discussion above, (2) is possible, and is consistent with (1). Taken together (1), (2), and (3) entail (4). Given the possibility of something like transworld depravity, it is possible that God could not have created a world containing moral good but no evil. This, Plantinga says, "solves the main philosophical problem of evil" (Plantinga 1977:64). Plantinga's accomplishment was that he provided a formal story according to which both God and evil exist (van Inwagen 2006:7). This story shows that God and evil are not incompatible.

Peter van Inwagen tells a similar story in which the omnipotent God gives humanity rationality and free will. In giving this gift of free will to his creatures, God, in his omniscience, knew that it gave his creatures the choice of either remaining connected to him in fellowship or departing from a relationship with him. While God can do all that he can do to increase the probability of his creatures continuing in relationship with him, he is not able to ensure that they do not rebel while also maintaining their freedom. Van Inwagen continues the story by highlighting, "the omniscient God knew that, however much evil might result from the elected separation from himself, and consequent self-ruin, of his creatures – if it should occur – the gift of free will would be, so to speak, worth it" (van Inwagen 2006:90). The existence of an eternity of love depends on this gift, and that eternity far outweighs the evils made possible by freedom in this life. Van Inwagen also sees natural evils as a special case of evil that is ultimately linked to the first abuse of free will in the garden. This story is thus a defence of theism in the face of evils in the amounts and kinds we find in the world including natural evil. While this defence seems plausible, there are some philosophers who argue that much evil in the world appears gratuitous, and thus God's

existence is improbable given the amount of evil seen in the world. I will look into this argument in the next section.

3.5.3 The probabilistic problem of evil

Given the success of free-will defence type arguments, natural atheologians have more recently opted to argue that the amount of evil we see in the world makes God's existence less probable. Graham Oppy argues that there are evils of the sort such that if a perfect being existed and had prevented the evil, the world would have been improved. Oppy believes there exist in the world problematic examples of evil that a perfect being should prevent, which, he believes, counts against a perfect being's existence (Oppy 2006:292).

William Rowe has argued similarly that there are rational grounds for accepting the existence of evil and suffering that an omnipotent and omniscient being could and would have prevented without losing some greater good or permitting some equally bad evil (Rowe 1979:336). Rowe believes this state of affairs provides rational grounds for dispensing with the belief in an omnipotent and wholly good God. While he is honest enough to acknowledge that humans are not in a position to know with certainty that evils exist that have no counterbalancing good, he does believe we are rational to believe such a state of affairs obtains, and thus he believes that it is rational to reject the existence of God on the basis of evident evil in the world (p. 337).

While it seems to many that there is more suffering than needed to bring about counterbalancing goods, this is by no means clear. Stephen Wykstra has argued that there may indeed exist outweighing goods for the amount of evil in the world, and it may also be the case that these goods may not be apparent to us. That is, God may in fact have an overriding good, a morally sufficient reason, for allowing the evil in the world, and our inability to discern that reason does not count against God's possibly having such a reason. Wykstra asks, "How likely is it that this should be apparent to us?" (Wykstra 1984:88). If God's vision and wisdom are greater than ours in a way at least analogous to an adult human's vision and wisdom being greater than a human baby, then it is unlikely that we

should be able to discern God's reasons for allowing evil and suffering. A baby cannot discern the purposes of his or her parent's allowing pain or suffering, though a parent may well have good reasons for allowing some pain and suffering. Humans may just not be equipped cognitively to ascertain all of God's purposes and plans and thus may not have epistemic access to God's morally sufficient reasons. Limited human cognitive access to God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil and suffering as we find it in the world, however, does not mean that God does not have them.

In light of this observation, Rowe has admitted that his confidence in the inference from the premise, "no good we know of justifies God in permitting many of the evils in our world" to the conclusion, "probably no good justifies God in permitting those evils," "has been somewhat diminished" (Rowe 2006:88). However, Rowe believes that the "skeptical theist" who holds that God may have reasons beyond our grasp is also likely to lose confidence in knowing anything about God and his purposes on the same grounds. I don't think this follows, for the sceptical Christian theist also holds a belief that God has revealed himself to us through special revelation, both in the Bible and in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, the theist, sceptical of knowing all the goods God might have for a particular evil, may well have confidence in the great and glorious weight of eternal glory. Atheistic philosophers may complain of special pleading, but it seems that for the problem of evil to be a genuine problem for Christian theism particularly, the one advancing the argument must take Christianity as it is and not restrict it to some bare theism sans revelation. Rowe's critique may well get to a real problem for a certain brand of theism in which God exists and there is no afterlife, or in which God does not reveal himself to humans, but it is weak when advanced against theism of the traditional Christian sort.

3.5.4 Summary of the problem of evil

The problem of evil is sometimes construed as a defeater for theism. To some, the magnitude and intensity of human and animal suffering disconfirm theism. In this section I've argued instead that the existence of evil actually demonstrates the existence of objective moral values and duties, and so

provides evidence for premise 2 of the moral argument for God's existence. Next, I enlisted Plantinga's help to demonstrate that some evil and suffering is logically compatible with theism's God. Finally, Stephen Wykstra's insights provided a rebuttal to the proponent of the probabilistic/evidential problem of evil. The problem of evil does not appear to be a defeater for the God of Christian theism or the moral argument.

3.6 Moral responsibility and free will

Audrey Anton has argued recently that praise and blameworthiness are not solely related to causal responsibility (Anton 2015:2).[1] Her thesis, if successful, could be thought to sever the link between one's free will and one's moral standing. In her book, *Moral responsibility and desert of praise and blame*, Anton argues that humans may be praiseworthy and blameworthy irrespective of that over which one has causal responsibility. Anton's view is a nonvolitional view of moral responsibility in which moral agents may be held morally praiseworthy or blameworthy for attitudes they did not choose. She argues that one can be deserving of moral praise or blame in virtue of a moral attitude both when the attitude causes nothing of moral import and when the attitude is not something the agent caused herself to have (p. 108). If correct, Anton's view would demonstrate that free will is not a necessary component for a moral theory. Anton's book is praiseworthy for its excellent summary of a vast number of complex issues surrounding moral responsibility and desert of praise and blame, though, for reasons I will detail below, I found her thesis unproven.

The standard view holds that "one is only blameworthy or praiseworthy insofar as one is responsible for that which grounds their blameworthiness or praiseworthiness" (Anton 2015:2). According to Anton, this view rests on two key assumptions: the primacy and causal assumptions. The former supposition of the standard view assumes that moral responsibility is a necessary condition for one's being worthy of praise or blame. The latter assumes the relevant kind of responsibility is a type of causal responsibility. Anton outlines the four main

[1] Portions of this section have been discussed by the author elsewhere (Pankratz 2016).

types of moral responsibility attributable to individuals and concludes that for the purpose of the standard view, it is retrospective responsibility that is required. Retrospective responsibility, or retrospective moral responsibility (RMR), is the type of responsibility considered when discussing an agent's worthiness of praise or blame "for or in virtue of things they have already done" (p. 4). The primacy and causal assumptions are inextricably connected in that the primacy assumption posits that one is only deserving of praise and blame for things that one has already done, and the causal assumption adds to this that one is only praise- or blameworthy for those acts for which one is causally responsible.

Anton's thesis, *contra* the standard view, is that "blameworthiness and praiseworthiness are not solely related to causal responsibility" (Anton 2015:2). Anton's work looks for ways in which humans may become worthy of praise or blame without being causally responsible for the action producing praise or blame. If successful, Anton would demonstrate the inadequacy of both the primacy and causal assumption.

Essential to Anton's moral attitudes account (MAA) is a shedding of the primacy assumption while linking praise and blameworthiness to moral attitudes in such a way that it is possible to be morally praise- or blameworthy in virtue of something for which the agent bears no RMR (Anton 2015:89). In making her case, Anton introduces us to Mortimer and Martha. Mortimer voluntarily and maliciously shoots and kills Martha. It seems clear enough that Mortimer has RMR for this act and is worthy of blame. Anton then asks us to imagine another scenario which is just like the above scenario, but in which "just seconds prior to Mortimer's presentation of his gun, Martha dies of a heart attack. This second Mortimer cannot be considered responsible for Martha's death" (p. 91). In this case, while Martha did in fact die, and this Mortimer did intend for her to die, nothing he did caused her to die, and thus, on the standard view, he cannot have RMR for her death and so carries no blame. Anton's intuitions tell her that while this second Mortimer is not the cause of Martha's death, Mortimer is "equally blameworthy in each situation". If this is the case, then blameworthiness can and does exist independent of RMR, and thus serves as a counterexample

to the primacy assumption. This would be a debilitating blow to the standard model.

Anton also asks us to consider Peter Van Inwagen's "Peter", who witnesses a mugging and fails to call the police out of fear for his own safety. In the example, Peter does not pick up the phone to call for help, but, unbeknownst to him, there has been some disaster at the telephone company such that every phone in the city is out of order at the time so that, even if Peter had tried to call for help, his attempt at communicating with the police would not have been successful. Anton believes this to be another counterexample to the primacy assumption because Peter has no RMR for not calling the police in virtue of the fact that it was impossible for him to be successful in placing the call, and yet he is still blameworthy. Anton argues that, if Peter is still blameworthy, absent RMR, then the "primacy assumption is false" (Anton 2015:94).

Further, Anton asks us to consider a third and fourth Mortimer. Third Mortimer, like the first and second Mortimer above, maliciously wishes that Martha would be murdered, but he never wills to kill her, nor does he will to get someone else to kill her because he is "thoroughly convinced that he would be caught if he even tried to murder her" (Anton 2015:96). This third Mortimer's external behaviour might be identical to a fourth Mortimer who loves and cares for Martha. Yet, we intuitively blame third Mortimer for features of his internal life and, in comparison, judge fourth Mortimer to be far more praiseworthy, even though neither causes any harm to Martha. It is only in virtue of third Mortimer's "(im)moral attitude of wishing harm on another person out of unjustified hate" that he is deserving of blame (p. 97). This feature of Mortimer, being deserving of blame while not being responsible for any morally significant event, seems, to Anton, to strike at the heart of the primacy assumption.

Building her case for the rejection of the primacy assumption, Anton asks us to consider another scenario. Imagine that "Matt and his child-hating friend, Louis, are driving carefully down a road one day when a toddler jumps out … landing right in front of Matt's vehicle before he is able to slam on the breaks. The child dies" (Anton 2015:100). In this case, Matt and Louis are not morally

responsible for killing the child. But, when “Matt discovers Louis was silently chuckling inside at the thought that they had ‘rid the world of one brat’ Matt blames him for taking pleasure in this tragedy”. If Louis had “no control over the death of the child or his reaction to it”, and yet is worthy of blame, we must see that blame is not necessarily connected to RMR and thus the standard view is incorrect.

If Anton is correct and the above are examples of instances where praise or blame is called for in agents while the agent is devoid of moral responsibility, one should conclude that the primacy assumption is false, since, in this case, a person would be worthy of praise or blame without being morally responsible. Anton’s own views are of the nonvolitional variety (Anton 2015:108), and she anticipates that volitionists, who maintain that one can only deserve blame for behaviour one chooses, will object to her reasoning. The hypothetical volitionist may make a distinction between being a bad person and being blameworthy (p. 109). Perhaps Mortimer three, Peter, and Louis are bad, but not deserving of blame. Anton argues that this does not do justice to the scenarios. Anton believes that we resent and blame the characters in virtue of their moral attitudes. Anton may be correct in her reasoning *contra* her hypothetical objector; however, there may be other ways of evaluating the scenarios that cast doubt on Anton’s conclusions. There are several ways to evaluate the cases differently than Anton does, which leave the primacy assumption in place.

First, is it appropriate to lay *equal* blame to Mortimer one and two? Both may indeed be blameworthy, and both share blame for willing to kill Martha and for their unjustified hatred of Martha (a blameworthy moral attitude they also share with the third Mortimer). However, Mortimer one also carries blame for one additional thing, namely killing Martha. Thus, they do not appear to be “equally blameworthy in each scenario”. Anton says that it is only a matter of luck that Mortimer two does not kill Martha, and thus he is equally to blame as Mortimer one (Anton 2015:91). If Anton is correct, her conclusion should cause much concern for every human as each person may end up being to blame for many things (and perhaps praiseworthy for many things) that are not presently laid to his charge. It may be merely a matter of luck that a given person did not kill Adolf

Hitler as many people find in themselves such a deep sense of resentment toward him that they have a will that lethal force be used to stop him from his murderous actions. It may simply be a matter of pure luck that many people are not in a position to kill him. If this is the case and Anton is correct, then we could attribute to those people the same praise or blame as if they had actually killed him since, on Anton's model, the actual killing is only a matter of luck.

Equally, imagine another individual, Douglas, who recognizes in himself a propensity to obey orders from superiors so strong that were he to have been raised in Nazi Germany, he would have followed orders and participated in the attempted genocide of the Jews in concentration camps. Is Douglas equally as blameworthy for genocide as the Nazi soldiers who carried out the act, since all that separates them is luck? Anton's view seems to lead us to attribute equal praise and blame to all those moral attitudes we share with others, since the actions that flowed from them are largely attributable to placement in particular circumstances as a result of historical luck. Rosa Parks rightly has streets named after her in virtue of her bravery to stand against inequality. My mother also stands against inequality and wills that instances of structural inequality be challenged, and it may be the case that she would have acted just as bravely as Mrs. Parks if faced with similar circumstances. Yet, to my knowledge, there are no streets named after my mother.

Anton could concede that Mortimer one and two are not *equally* blameworthy while still maintaining that the mere fact that Mortimer two carries blame while not killing Martha gives a person a reason to reject the primacy assumption. Like Anton, I am not compelled by endorsement strategies that hold people responsible for moral attitudes only when the moral agent endorses or identifies with their act, and so I agree with Anton that blame should be laid to folks like Mortimer two, Peter, and Louis for their moral attitudes (Anton 2015:128). However, Anton has not convinced me that those individuals have no RMR linked to their blame. To be sure, Mortimer two and three's blame is not linked to Martha's death, Peter's blame is not linked to his failure to communicate with the police, and Louis's blame is not linked to him being the cause of the child's death in an RMR sense. Yet, Mortimer has a moral attitude

of unjustified hatred, Peter is a coward, and Louis is a callous child hater. Anton has not shown that their blame is not connected to RMR, but merely that the justified blame is disconnected from a particular event for which they do not have RMR.

Might Mortimer, Peter, and Louis have RMR for holding (im)moral attitudes? Is it possible that they *should* have seen those attitudes to be wrong, and, in the same way that we are blameworthy for past behaviour that we are responsible for, should not Mortimer, Peter, and Louis be praiseworthy or blameworthy for past mental behaviour that led them to hold the moral attitudes they hold? If not, then Anton's MAA entails that agents may not be responsible for their moral attitudes. I am persuaded that while we may not be in direct control of our moral attitudes in the sense that one cannot simply stop being racist any more than one can simply stop desiring to eat whipped cream, it is also true that humans make judgments based on reasons that can change our attitudes toward racism and whipped cream. We seek to persuade the racist, sexist, and homophobe that her moral attitude is wrong. This endeavour assumes that the agent is in some type of control over her moral attitudes and that moral reasoning plays a role in shaping them. As long as a person has the capacity to recognize, assess, and respond to reasons that bear on the justifiability of one's attitudes, one could say that person has RMR for her attitudes.

Angela Smith has recently argued that a person's evaluative judgements are "genuine tendencies on the part of the person to place evaluative significance on certain features of the situations she confronts. And it is this feature judgment-dependence that makes it appropriate, in principle, to ask a person to defend or disavow her attitudes (in a way that it would not be appropriate to ask a person to defend a headache or a sneeze)" (Angela Smith 2015:125). Anton does not consider Smith's argument that an agent is responsible for her attitudes if she has the capacity to critically evaluate reasons and if that person's attitudes are responsive to her assessment of reasons. Smith's rational control "explains why we are answerable—and hence responsible—for our attitudes" (p. 127). If something like Smith's "rational

control" is an accurate vision of how agents are responsible for their moral attitudes in virtue of things they have already done (having evaluated reasons and formed responsive attitudes on the basis of those reasons), then it seems to me that Anton's rejection of the primacy objection has been too hasty, and the link between RMR and worthiness of praise and blame has not been severed.

If this is the case, then Anton has not shaken RMR from a person's worthiness of praise and blame. A person is still worthy of praise and blame for acts (mental and physical) for which she is morally responsible, and so the primacy assumption need not be rejected. Rather, with the standard view, one could argue that an agent is only blameworthy or praiseworthy insofar as the agent is responsible for that which grounds her blameworthiness or praiseworthiness, with moral attitudes being a part of one's life for which one is causally responsible.[16] In this case, the strong link between one's free will and that for which they are morally praise or blameworthy remains intact.

3.7 Summary of chapter three

In this chapter, I first took up the challenge of abstract objects and their relation to the moral argument for God's existence. I argued that abstract objects, if extant and dependent on God, do not threaten the moral argument for God's existence. Further, I hope to have shown that anti-realism is able to overcome the two arguments which are the primary motivation for adopting realism with regard to abstract objects. Further, I have argued that realism regarding abstract objects entails numerous absurdities and problems that weigh against it, and that biblical theology provides arguments against the existence of abstract objects which are independent of God. Secondly, I argued that the Euthyphro dilemma is not damaging to Christian theism in which God is understood as the ultimate standard of the good. Thirdly, I argued that the problem of evil does not undercut the moral argument for God's existence. Not only does the problem of evil in its logical and evidential forms fail to provide a

[16] In Luke 12:47–48, Jesus teaches us that "greater knowledge brings about greater responsibility" (Keener 2014:215). The more we learn of God's ethical ideals, the more those are meant to shape our action and moral attitudes.

defeater for Christian theism, it seems that evil's very existence provides evidential support for the existence of objective good and evil and thus provides the natural theologian with strong evidence for the premise, "objective values and duties exist". Lastly, I analysed one recent philosophical challenge to the link between moral responsibility and free will and found it to be lacking.

Chapter four: A biblical theology in support of the moral argument

4.1 Biblical theology's role in support of the moral argument

The previous chapters have presented and defended the moral argument for God's existence. For the argument to support Christian theism, the philosopher must take the additional step of demonstrating that the argument is at home in a Christian theistic context. Christian theism is a step beyond mere theism. Mere theism remains open to various expressions of the divine, while Christian theism exclusively embraces the God who has revealed himself in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and in the person and work of Jesus Christ. To be persuasive, the Christian theist utilizing the moral argument needs to show that what the argument requires is compatible with that revelation. This has both a positive and a defensive element.

On the positive side, the Christian, using the moral argument as evidence for the existence of God, should demonstrate that the entailments of the moral argument are at home in the Christian theistic worldview. The moral argument points to a link between God and objective morality. The argument claims that God is the final standard for objective moral values and duties. The Christian theist using the argument needs to demonstrate that the God who has revealed himself in the Old and New Testaments and in the person and work of Jesus Christ could be that standard. Further, the Christian ethicist needs to provide an account of morality that is based on God as the standard for objective values while also providing duties for the Christian theist. I will argue that biblical data in combination with some form of the divine command theory (DCT) is able to account for the metaphysical realities that arise necessarily from the moral argument.

On the negative side, an objector may point to elements within the revealed components of the Christian tradition that cast doubt on God's being the source of objective moral values and duties. Sam Harris, for example, claims the Bible is full of "obscene celebrations of violence" (Harris 2007:11), and that

“Christians have abused, oppressed, enslaved, insulted, tormented, tortured, and killed people in the name of God for centuries, on the basis of a theologically defensive reading of the Bible” (p. 23). Cyril Rodd claims that the Old Testament is “the most bloodthirsty of all the sacred scriptures within the great religious traditions” (Rodd 2001:185). One might question if God or his commands could be good if he commands things like rape, genocide, and child sacrifice. To claim the moral argument as support for the God of Christian theism, the biblical theologian must show that the God of the Old and New Testaments could be the ultimate standard of good, and so the theologian will need to take biblical data seriously.

4.2 Positive case introduction

The biblical theologian using the moral argument for God’s existence should be able to demonstrate two connections. First, the theologian will want to show that biblical revelation connects with the entailments of the moral argument. Then, the biblical theologian using the moral argument should also be able to connect God’s being the standard of morality to a theory of how God’s values become duties in a coherent way.

As noted previously, several necessary metaphysical realities arise from the moral argument that must be true of a particular worldview in order for the argument considered to support that worldview. First, the worldview must have some ultimate source from which objective moral values and duties flow. These values and duties must not exist independently of this ultimate source. Further, humans must be free with respect to the moral law in order to be truly moral beings. Without these, it is hard to see how the moral argument could function. If there is no ultimate source for objective morality, then the grounding of objective moral values and duties appears to be vexingly elusive, and without real moral agency, there is no sense talking about moral duties. There are other things that may be required to fill out a full moral theory, such as answering the epistemological question regarding how humans come to know the duties they are required to perform. However, that question, it seems to me, is of secondary

concern and is not essential to the moral argument, as it is logically possible that God could exist and could require moral actions from us that he does not communicate. We may not have a full moral theory in that case, but the moral argument does not depend on a full moral theory, just the existence of objective moral values and duties. Should objective moral values and duties exist, whether or not we know about them, their existence points to a divine source. That said, I believe the Christian worldview does present its adherents with a full moral theory, and later in this chapter, I will examine this epistemological link to God's commands. Before analysing this epistemological link, I will relate biblical data regarding human freedom and God's existence as the ground of objective moral values and duties.

4.2.1 Divine aseity and human freedom

The moral argument entails a God who is himself the ground for all moral values and duties. This God must not depend on outside beings for his moral goodness. The God of Christian theism is self-existent (aseity), as discussed in chapter 3.1.5, and so appears to contain the first necessary metaphysical reality that the moral argument for God's existence would necessitate. The biblical data discussed in 3.1.5 points to God as the source of all that has come into being and as subject to nothing outside of himself. What about human free will? The moral argument entails that humans have duties, and it seems meaningless to speak of duties or prohibitions if one is incapable of performing the duty or refraining from a prohibited action. If Christian theism is to gain support from the moral argument, it must contain the necessary elements in its worldview required by the moral argument. Does the biblical witness develop a worldview in which humans enjoy free will? The biblical data is replete with statements that appear to support the notion that humans have been endowed with free will. In what follows, I will connect several dots from within the larger biblical narrative that together point towards a deep resonance of free will within the biblical story.

It should be noted that the theologian arguing for moral agency and free will does not need every action to be free. There is no conflict with free will if

some events are determined, or some wills are, at times, not free. Further, humans' free will does not need to mean "free to do anything." There are obvious limitations to what humans can freely do. There may also be non-obvious limitations that impact human's ability to freely choose one thing over another. What does seem to be required though, is some form indeterministic outlook in which humans are able to intend or purpose to do somethings as they go about their life. That is to say, that, humans have options available to them, and that they are able to bring about whichever of the options they will without being controlled to do so by some other agent or mechanism (Kane 2007, 30). In what follows, several biblical examples of this basic kind of freedom will be shown.

In the garden in Genesis 1–2, God gives Adam and Eve several commands. He commands them to be fruitful and multiply, to exercise dominion over every living thing on the earth (Gen. 1:28), and to avoid eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). The ensuing discussion between Eve and the serpent provides evidence Eve had freedom with regards to keeping or breaking God's commandment to avoid eating the fruit of the specified tree. The serpent reasons with Eve, providing her with reasons to rebel against God's command. Following the discussion, Eve surmises that the fruit is good for food, a delight to her eyes, and desirous to make one wise. These reasons were enough for her to justify breaking God's command. In the biblical narrative, Adam sins along with Eve, and God holds Adam and Eve accountable for their moral lapse. Genesis 3 catalogues the punishment that Adam and Eve and their progeny would experience as a result. God had promised death would come to them if they rebelled, and in Genesis 3:21, God sacrifices an animal for Adam and Eve. God provides a substitute that he uses to clothe Adam and Eve. This biblical data point provides evidence for the Christian worldview's foundational acceptance of human freedom with regards to following or rebelling against duties prescribed by God.

As the biblical narrative progresses, we encounter numerous examples of people who are called to follow God's commands and worship him alone. In Genesis 22, Abraham leads his son to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him in

obedience to God's command, and in a chilling moment, at the last possible moment, God commands him to stay the knife. His freedom to obey or rebel is what provides the drama to the story in which God makes a demand that would test every moral agent. The story forces us to ask, "What would I do if God commanded such a thing?" Of course, God does not demand child sacrifice, and on the mountain the Lord provided a substitute. That event ends up being a powerful lens through which the readers of the biblical narrative may view several other moments in history.

First, King David uses his free will to sin against the Lord, and the Angel of the Lord breaks out against Israel. The Angel of the Lord draws a sword to slay all of Israel; at the last moment God calls on the angel to stay the sword, and David makes a sacrifice. Here, again atop Mount Moriah, the Lord provides a substitute: an animal is sacrificed. Interestingly, this time the animal does not die to keep death from just one person, but for the nation (1 Chron. 21).

Later, the temple is built on that same mountain, at the very spot David made the sacrifice (2 Chron. 3:1). On that mountain, sacrifices are made to atone for the evil deeds of Israel. The temple and the sacrifices are an answer to the Lord providing the substitute needed. As Israel lives with God, they sometimes use their freedom to sin, and God teaches them that they are accountable for their sin. Their sin leads to death, which is essentially what God told Adam and Eve in the garden. God, in his grace, allows a substitute.

In the Gospels comes Immanuel, God with us, who takes on flesh and dwells among us. God incarnate, Jesus of Nazareth, preached the good news of the Kingdom of God. He repeatedly challenged Israel to abandon a religious life that appeared on the outside to honour God while internally many religious leaders' hearts were far from God. In Matthew 23, Jesus highlights the problem forcefully. While God called his people to follow him, the Jews had devised ways to appear to be following him while remaining disobedient. Jesus says, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within

you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mt. 23:27–28). Jesus notes the fact that he has sent many messengers to warn them of this problem and they continually kill, crucify, flog, and persecute them (v. 34). He laments, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (v. 37). The religious leaders continually rid themselves of God's messengers and keep distance between God's people and God's heart for them. God would have to do something dramatic to reach those he loves. Rather than sending a messenger to speak God's words, God sends his Son, the divine Word, to lead God's people into a relationship with him (vv. 33–44). In the climax of the biblical narrative, Jesus is crucified. In a moment of absolute horror, God's only Son is hung from a "tree".

Once again on Mount Moriah an only son is offered, but this time God does not stay the hand, and Jesus is put to death. Jesus is the sacrifice the Lord provides. He is the sacrifice that saves not one person, not even one nation, but all who would trust in him for salvation (Jn. 1:12; 3:16; Rom. 1:16; 1 Jn. 2:2). The biblical narrative assumes, at every level, that humans have freedom enough to choose to follow God's commands or to rebel, and that all have chosen to rebel (Rom. 3:23). God saves humans from the penalty of sin by providing a sacrifice that is of infinite value. Jesus is not an innocent third party who gets called in to pay for our sins. Rather, the biblical narrative portrays Jesus as the divine Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus is not an innocent third party; he is the offended one (Lk. 5:21; Mk. 2:7). It is against him we have sinned, and on the cross, he bears the penalty and curse of our rebellion. The biblical narrative centres on God's gracious act to free humans from the penalty which flows from the choice to rebel against God's law.

The above meta-narrative is consonant with numerous other biblical stories in which people appear to be genuinely free to follow God or to rebel. Throughout the biblical narrative, countless individuals are faced with moral choices and make decisions (sometimes good and sometimes bad) for which they are accountable. The agent's ability to choose his or her course of action

freely appears to be assumed in each case. For example, when Ananias and Sapphira sinned by lying to the Holy Spirit, Peter makes the point that they were free to dispose of their property as they saw fit, but that they chose to keep some of the proceeds from the sale of their property and to tell the apostles they had donated all of the proceeds to support Christ's work (Acts 5:1–11). The problem is not that they kept some of the funds from the sale, but that they chose to lie about the percentage they were giving. In a separate incident many years prior, Joshua gave a rousing speech that also appears to assume the Israelites were genuinely free to follow God or follow other idols. Nearing death, Joshua challenged God's people to "choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). Israel appears to be in a position either to accept or reject God's leadership. While Israel chooses to serve God, their actions throughout the course of the biblical narrative betray an idolatrous heart. God pleads with Israel numerous times, calling them to "return to me" (Joel 2:12; Isa. 44:22; Jer. 4:1; Zech. 1:3; Mal. 3:7).

While all this certainly sounds like genuine freedom, what is the biblical theologian to do with passages that appear to undermine this freedom?

4.2.2 Objections to biblical free will from scripture

Along with the general description of freedom above, the biblical data also contains passages where it appears people are not genuinely free. Two such passages are worth considering. In the first passage, God is said to "harden" Pharaoh's heart such that he cannot let God's people go despite Moses' signs, wonders, and pleading (Exod. 7:3). In the second passage, God is said to "blind the eyes" of his people so that they would not choose to turn to him (Isa. 44:18).

It seems the biblical theologian making use of the moral argument for God's existence must hold some form of real moral freedom for the argument to be of any benefit to Christian theism. If humans are not morally free, then it seems talk of objective moral values and duties are not of much use and impose no real demands on our conduct since we would not be really free to obey or disobey. The biblical theologian who holds to a hard deterministic outlook seems

to rob the moral argument of any real value because that theologian does not believe humans are capable of making moral choices. That said, I believe the biblical theologian could argue that in some cases and in some respects, God sovereignly may override (harden or blind) human freedom while preserving freedom in most cases. At the most, from Exodus 7 and Isaiah 44 (and similar passages) it could be argued that in those specific cases, God did leave all options open to the people in question. This, of course, would say nothing about the rest of human history and the duties God expects in other cases. It would be perfectly compatible with the biblical narrative to believe that while humans, by and large, are free moral agents, God has at times acted to override specific people of their freedom in regard to a specific value or duty. This would preserve God's sovereignty in those cases while also preserving genuine human freedom in the majority of cases. Yet I think there is another way to analyse those verses which does not require one to believe God overrides human freedom even in those cases.

Exodus 7:3 recalls God's prophetic foretelling of his hardening of Pharaoh's heart in 4:21. The ancient world regarded the heart as the seat of the intellect and will (Cole 1973:84). Pharaoh's heart being hardened means his mind was made up and his will set. He would not be persuaded by Moses' miracles. Pharaoh is sometimes said to harden his own heart (Exod. 8:15), sometimes God is said to harden his heart (7:3), and sometimes the hardening is described in natural descriptive terms (7:13). R. Alan Cole argues that in the Old Testament, descriptions of events are often given from two different angles. Some events are told from two distinct perspectives: human and divine. He notes that the parting of the sea during the Exodus narrative is described both as God's sovereign action and as a result of tide and wind (Exod. 14). These are not separate explanations, but merely the same explanation viewed from a different angle (Cole 1973:84). It may well be that the means by which Pharaoh's heart came to be hardened was not through some extraordinary intervention on God's part, but "it may be by the ordinary experiences of life, operating through the principles and character of human nature". In this way, God could be seen as hardening Pharaoh's heart in a similar way that I might be said to be making

somebody angry. When I make another person mad, I am not doing something supernatural. Rather, I am acting in a way, perhaps on purpose, that elicits a response of anger. God may be thought to be acting in a way he knows will only serve to harden Pharaoh's heart, and so he is a contributing cause, but Pharaoh is still responsible. In the same way, I may say something to another person that enrages them, but they are still responsible for their reaction to my words. God may know perfectly well how Pharaoh will respond in any given situation and act in a way that will result in Pharaoh's heart being hardened while still holding Pharaoh responsible for his response.

God's foreknowledge (Ps. 139:1–6; Isa. 44:6–8, 46:9–10, Ezek. 21:21–23, Rom. 8:29, 1 Pet. 1:1–2) does not necessarily entail a denial of genuinely free human actions and choices.[17] The biblical witness seems to hold human freedom and God's foreknowledge in tandem with no contradiction. Throughout the Bible, people are commanded and exhorted, and they believe, choose, sin, are tested, and respond to God's initiative (Craig 2000:46), and God is said to know perfectly the course of action of every individual in each case. The philosopher need not be troubled by this, for what is meant by freedom in each case is that the person in question is free to act or to choose a different course of action. For Pharaoh to be free would mean he was free to harden his heart or not to harden it. It is possible that God foreknew how Pharaoh would respond in that situation. In that case, Pharaoh does not harden his heart because God foreknows; rather, God foreknows because Pharaoh will harden his heart (p. 73). God's foreknowledge is chronologically prior to Pharaoh's hardening, but Pharaoh's hardening is logically prior to God's foreknowledge (p. 74). Thus, Pharaoh's hardening is the reason God foreknows that Pharaoh will harden his heart when Moses demands the release of God's people.

[17] LDS philosopher Blake Ostler believes that divine foreknowledge is inconsistent with libertarian free will (Ostler 1999:44; Ostler 1984:69). He finds God's foreknowledge to fix one's future such that humans have only one possible future open to them. In contrast, I believe that there are several options open to the theist to maintain both that humans are free moral agents and that God has complete foreknowledge of how we will freely act (e.g. Carson 1994, and Lang 2018).

This explanation may also serve to shed light on another passage. In Isaiah 44:18, the prophet Isaiah, who has been preaching to Israel, claims their irresponsiveness to his message is due to the fact that "[God] has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand". Interestingly, Isaiah can claim God has shut their eyes and hearts to him, but he also describes the mechanism used: idol worship. That is, the idol worship Israel has engaged in (Isa. 44:9–17) resulted in this dullness. Here is a situation where God can be said to be active but acts through natural cause and effect. God has so ordered the world such that idol worship dulls one's responsiveness to God. Through Israel's freely chosen idolatry, God is at work making Israel irresponsive to his message. Isaiah, rather than blaming God for Israel's dullness, points to Israel's idolatry as the real problem (Motyer 1999:313).

Isaiah 44:18 is quite similar to a statement made by Jesus found in Mark's Gospel. In Mark 4:21, Jesus claims that he teaches in parables "so that 'they may indeed see but not perceive and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven". This is actually a quote from another passage in Isaiah (6:9–10). Jesus claims that his parables serve to make the hearers imperceptive and lacking understanding. This need not mean that he is supernaturally overriding their ability to perceive or understand, but that his parables have that effect on people. Jesus could be said to be causing the hearers to "not understand", but he does not do so through a miraculous overriding of their will, but through a teaching style that has that effect on the pupil. In such a way, God's purpose is served, and human free will is preserved.

This is not to say that every person is as free as every other. The biblical theologian who wished to fill out a full theory of sin and its effects of humans and the work of the Spirit in the life of the follower of Christ would likely want to describe differences between the freedom Adam and Eve had in the garden, the life of the person after the fall but before God's Spirit indwelt the followers of Jesus, and a person who has the Spirit indwelling in them. While there are likely significant distinctions to be made, the moral argument does not require that level of specificity. What does seem to be required is that humans, possessing some freedom of choice, are moral agents and are thus endowed with moral

responsibility. It seems that the biblical witness allows for that sort of freedom even in the tough cases. Even if a person reads a text like Romans 9:17–18 in a way that precludes any sort of freedom for Pharaoh in the case of his heart being hardened, this does not do away with humans having the freedom to choose between competing options in many cases. The moral argument, to be used in a Christian worldview, does not require that nothing is ever determined, but that some beings have the freedom to choose between options in moral situations and are thus, moral agents.

4.2.3 Moral realism in the Bible

If I have been successful in previous sections, it has been shown that the biblical data supports God as the ultimate source of all that exists and that human free will is in harmony with the biblical data. For the moral argument to be used as evidence for the God of Christian theism, one must not only show that God is self-existent and that humans have free will, but also that moral values and duties exist. It is possible to have a worldview in which God is the grounding of all being but in which objective moral values and duties do not obtain. The moral argument would not support such a worldview. The Christian theist, then, must connect God as the ultimate being to biblical data showing God to be the grounding of objective moral values and duties. In what follows, I hope to accomplish just that. I will turn my attention first to the Old Testament (OT) and then to the New Testament (NT).

4.2.4 Old Testament support for the moral argument

In the OT, God's words often come to God's people by way of prophetic utterance. Many commands and obligations are laid to the charge of individuals and groups from God by way of prophets (e.g. Exod. 32:37) or angelic messengers (e.g. Judg. 6:20). However, sometimes God speaks his moral law directly. While there are many such examples, two such instances are worth considering. In what follows, biblical data that relates to God's being the grounding for moral values and duties will be provided.

The early chapters of Genesis make it clear that God is the creator of the cosmos and of humanity. He is responsible for the existence of absolutely everything and everybody (Longman 2016:84). God creates the heavens and the earth and places Adam and Eve, whom he created in his image, in a garden. God's creation of Adam and Eve points to God's giving those first humans a nature. "We have to be able to say what human nature is before we can say what human life ought to be. The Bible supplies the definition: 'God created man[kind] in his own image…male and female he created them" (Motyer 2005:214). God creates, and in that creation we see incredible order, design, and purposefulness. In the early parts of Genesis, God sets out a moral vision for Adam and Eve.

Genesis declares God to be more than creator; he is legislator as well. God's commands give humans the fundamental choice to obey or disobey (Hare 2010:70). God gives Adam and Eve four imperatives: 1) be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28), 2) have dominion over the other living creatures (Gen. 1:28), 3) work and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15), and 4) avoid eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). God establishes both a physical world as well as a moral landscape in which Adam and Eve are to dwell.

Adam and Eve sin by eating the prohibited fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "The Hebrew word for 'knowledge' implies experience" (Longman 2005:110). In eating the fruit, Adam and Eve claim to know better than God how to conduct their lives. They experience evil, "separating their moral judgment from God's". They assert their own will over and against God's. This is the introduction of sin into the world. Sin is a rebellion against God, a refusal to accept him as Lord (Longman 2016:71). By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve substituted their own ideas of right and wrong in the place of God's definition.

God warned of impending death were they to eat the prohibited fruit, and though Adam and Eve did not die immediately, God does hold them accountable. God confronts Adam and Eve in their rebellion in Genesis chapter three. In Genesis 3:14–19, God announces punishment, and in 3:20–24 he

executes his judgment for their sin. As discussed earlier, a death does occur—a substitute that covers their shame and which points to Jesus as the sacrificial death that would pay the penalty of even this sin—and Adam and Eve are cut off from the tree of life, thus relegating them to eventually returning to the dust from which they came.

Genesis 1–3 establishes God as the lawgiver who holds his creatures accountable. His commands form the basis for the moral situations that occur. God gives Adam and Eve a short list of dos and don'ts, and these describe the objective values and duties Adam and Eve were meant to embrace. They are objective because they issue from a source beyond their subjective experience. This source is not an abstract entity, but God himself.

A second biblical episode carries with it a similar conclusion. God's self-revelation to his people at Mount Sinai is remarkable in a number of ways. First, God's presence is manifested to God's people with smoke, fire, thunder, lightning, and trumpet blasts (Exod. 19:16–20). Second, this instance is the only place where God speaks to the whole of God's people corporately (Deut. 5:22–27). Even more remarkable, with the Ten Commandments God gives Israel laws written by God's own hand (Exod. 31:18, 32:16). While other legislation was kept beside the ark (Deut. 31:24–26), these tablets were placed *in* the ark (Exod. 25:16). These details underscore the commandments' transcendent source and endurance (Miller 2009:3). The Ten Commandments form a foundational starting point for moral law from which all the other Old Testament laws flow (p. 13). God is the source for these laws and thus for all the moral laws that flow from this foundation. Just as God told Moses how to be holy in his presence (Exod. 3:13–14), this law provides the basis for Israel to live in the presence of their holy God (Lev. 19). God did not learn these laws from some other source. He is the final moral grounding for the laws he commands. Isaiah 40:13–14 asks,

> "Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his council? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?"

Of course, these questions all expect and demand the negative, “No one”. God does not learn about justice or gain understanding from anybody else. He is from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 90:2) and has always been the source of moral truth.

We see in the Old Testament clear teaching that links God to the moral law. God is the foundation for all that has come into being. God created humans in his image and gave them a nature. He provided Adam and Eve a physical dwelling, a moral landscape, and endowed them with free will to choose to follow his rule or to rebel. Adam and Eve chose to rebel, and God held them accountable for that choice. In the same way, God reveals his law to his people on Mount Sinai, showing them the enduring source and endurance of the objective moral values and duties that he lays to their charge. This shows the Old Testament to be firmly in line with the necessary metaphysical realities required by the moral argument. What about the distinctively Christian scriptures—the New Testament? Do we find a similar attitude toward moral realism in that scriptural deposit?

4.2.5 Introduction to New Testament support for the moral argument

The moral vision of the Old Testament begins with the assumption that God is the grounding for moral values and duties. That assumption appears to be the basis for the moral vision found in the New Testament (NT) as well. In what follows, I will provide brief evidence that the NT shares the understanding that God is the ultimate grounding of objective moral values and duties by looking at three bodies of literature in the NT. I will examine Jesus’s own teaching, the moral teaching of the Apostle Paul, and then other writings in the NT.

4.2.6 Jesus’ teaching in support of the moral argument

Jesus does not teach the same way as other teachers of the law. Teachers of the law appeal to revealed laws and case law to establish right action. Jesus taught differently. This is clear in many places, but Matthew 7:29

recalls how amazed those who heard Jesus teaching were, “for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes”. The scribal habit in that era was to appeal to authority. Jesus did not appeal to an outside authority. Instead he claimed his teachings to be authoritative (Morris 1992:184). Those who hear and obey Jesus’ teaching are like a wise man who builds his house on the rock, while those who hear his words and do not put them into practice are like the foolish man who built his house on the sand (Mt. 7:24–27). As Richard B. Hayes points out in is work, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Jesus presents himself as the “one teacher” and “one instructor” (Mt. 23:8–11) who supplants all others (Hayes 1996:95).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasts his authority with traditional understandings of the law. Six times in Matthew 5:21–48 Jesus says, “You have heard it said…But I say to you…” Jesus understands himself to have moral authority in that his teaching fulfils the law of God (Mt. 5:17–20). Jesus teaches that God’s law does not pass away, that we are accountable to it, and that he is the authoritative interpreter and giver of the law of God. Hearing and obeying Jesus’ teaching is hearing and obeying God’s teaching.

The moral argument requires God to be the source for objective moral values and duties. The God revealed in the OT appears as just that source. Jesus’ teachings do not usurp God’s authority; rather, he teaches with that same authority. Thus, Jesus’ teachings are an affirmation of God as the unique source of objective moral values and duties.

4.2.7 The Apostle Paul in support of the moral argument.

Paul’s ethic is thoroughly theological. His moral vision stems from the fact that God has acted in Christ to redeem a community of those who trust in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for them. Paul’s moral thinking seems to be centred on three loci of thought. First, each human has sinned and is accountable to God and therefore stands objectively condemned by God and deserving of his wrath. Secondly, humans are forgiven of their sins and stand holy and blameless before God by repenting of their sins and trusting in Jesus and his propitiatory

death.[1] Thirdly, those who have turned to Christ for the forgiveness of their sins are called to live in obedience to the resurrected Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.[2]

In the first focal point, Paul teaches that humans are accountable to God's law (Rom. 3:19, 1 Cor. 6:10). That is, there is a law higher than any human court. God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7); all lawbreakers are accountable for their departure from God's objective standard of right and wrong. In light of God's ultimate judgment, Paul did not worry about seeking approval from other humans, but from God (Gal. 1:10).

With regard to the second focal point, the good news is that God has provided a way for sinners to be made holy in his sight through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus does not wink away accountability; instead, his death on the cross is the ultimate show of God's accounting of sin.

In the third focus, Paul writes about those who have trusted in Jesus and have received God's grace of salvation, the redemption of sins. Paul enjoins redeemed humans to work out their salvation (Phil. 2:12). They are to live in a manner worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:21, 27). This kind of life corresponds to the good news Jesus preached and the kingdom he established (Hanson 2009:171). Paul expects the Spirit-filled follower of Christ to continue to work out his or her salvation as God works in the life of the believer (Phil. 2:13). He urges those who have been saved from their sins to make that salvation fruitful in the present (O'Brien 1991:273).

Paul understands the moral law to be objective and to find its source in God who holds us accountable. While we have all sinned and are thus deserving of God's wrath, God has demonstrated his love for us by sending Jesus to bear the curse of the law for us. Those who trust in the sacrifice of Christ are filled by the Spirit of God and are expected to begin living out the ethics of Christ's

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[1] See Rom. 3:23–24, 6:23; Gal. 2:15–16, 3:10–14; Eph. 2:5–22; Col. 1:12–14, 1:21–22, Phil. 3:9.

[2] Rom. 6:4, 8:4; Gal. 5:16, 22–25; Eph. 4:17, 5:18.

kingdom now. Thus, Paul's theology contains evidence for a Christian belief in a God who is the source and grounding for objective moral values and duties.

4.2.8 Other NT writings in support of the moral argument

I have been examining biblical theological reasons for giving assent to the claim that the God of the Bible can be conceived of as the God described by the moral argument. I have looked at OT writings and the teachings of Jesus and Paul found in the NT. In this final section on this point, I will examine several other NT authors.

James 2:8–13 argues that God is the lawgiver and that the person who breaks one of God's laws is a lawbreaker and thus accountable for judgment. He also understands that faith in Jesus is the basis on which a person is saved from such judgment and that a person with faith will obey God's commands (2:14–26). He urges followers of Christ to be doers of God's word and not hearers only (1:22). James understands God as the ultimate source and ground for human obligations and reminds us all that we are accountable to him.

The Apostle Peter demands that followers of Christ obey God's commands, being holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:14–16). He understands God as the ground for true holiness and that humans are accountable to God for their conduct. Peter reminds us that God is the impartial judge who judges each according to one's deeds (1:17). Of course, Peter knows we are delivered from that judgment by the "precious blood of Jesus" (1:19), but he expects that truth to purify those who receive Christ's redemption so that they can be "obedient to the truth" (1:22). Peter recognizes God's authority to issue commands and our responsibility to obey. He sees a day of judgment and destruction for those who have not lived up to God's objective moral values and duties and who have not been redeemed by the blood of Jesus (2 Pet. 3:1–7). This understanding that the Lord will judge and bring destruction on the ungodly should motivate God's people to live lives of holiness and godliness while we wait for Christ's return (3:11–12). Peter understands that God is the ultimate source of moral standards and that humans are accountable to him for living in accord with his commands.

The Apostle John reveals that “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). This statement forms the basis for the ethical implications John makes in the verses that follow (Krause 2000:61). God’s character provides the basis for ethical action. It is essentially an ontological claim about God’s nature; his “moral perfection, truthfulness and impeccability” (Baggett and Campbell 2013:350). God is light, and so his morally perfect character assures us of the rightness of all his actions. Similarly, because there is no darkness in him at all, “God does not require of us, with respect to moral goodness and love, what is not true of himself” (p. 351).

In another of the Apostle John’s works, the book of Revelation showcases God’s ultimate justice. God fully and finally judges all those with moral standing. Revelation 21:11–15 speaks of that accounting where every person is fully accountable to God for every action.[3]

4.2.9 Summary of the biblical data

For the moral argument to support Christian theism, the philosopher must take the additional step of demonstrating that the argument is at home in a Christian theistic context. To be persuasive, the Christian theist utilizing the moral argument needs to show that what the argument entails is compatible with what God has revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Christian scripture is in harmony with the moral argument for God’s existence in that it points to a God who is the full and final source of moral goodness. The biblical data supports God as the ultimate source of all that began to exist and that human free will is in harmony with the biblical data. Furthermore, both the Old and New Testaments agree that humans are ultimately accountable to God for their actions and will be judged by his perfect standard of goodness.

[3] See also 1 Pet. 4:7.

4.3 Summary of the positive case

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have in built a positive case for the compatibility of Christian theism with the moral argument. It has been argued that the biblical deposit connects with the entailments of the moral argument in several ways. First, the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, points to moral realism. Beyond moral realism, the Bible upholds God as the grounding for objective moral values and duties. Furthermore, the Bible points its readers to real human moral freedom and genuine accountability. In this way, the Christian God appears to satisfy the needed moral elements to be considered a plausible candidate for the God the moral argument points us toward.

4.4 Negative case introduction

Even if the biblical God appears to satisfy the needed moral elements required to be considered a plausible candidate for the God of the moral argument, there still might be other reasons for rejecting the Christian God as the God whose existence is supported by the moral argument. The dominant view of how God obligates humans to live in accord with the moral law is known as the Divine Command Theory (DCT). This theory has numerous objections, which, if fatal, could cast some doubt as to the biblical God's connection to objective moral values and duties. While this argument may not serve as a defeater for Christian theism's being the God of the moral argument, overcoming the various objections may enable one to see more clearly how the biblical God could serve as the grounding of objective moral values and duties. More fundamental, however, are claims that the God of the Bible permits and prescribes immoral actions. If the biblical God issues commands that are clearly in violation of basic moral principles, then we would have good reason to dismiss the biblical God as a candidate for being evidenced by the moral argument. In what follows, the DCT will be described and defended, and biblical data containing alleged immoral commands will be analysed.

4.5 Divine command theory introduction

As stated above, for the moral argument to be successful, one does not need to develop a full moral theory. For example, the natural theologian need not be tied to a specific moral epistemology. That said, a number of thoughtful Christians have argued that the Bible does specify some broad strokes of a full moral theory. The DCT is such a theory and has a number of supporters. Those Christian theists who espouse the DCT must show that it is in harmony with the moral argument if they are to use that argument.

4.5.1 What is the divine command theory

A variety of philosophers and theologians have offered a version of the DCT. Robert Adams argues that God is the supreme Good and all acts are ultimately judged either good or bad in light of how faithful the act is to God. For Adams, goodness in us is the same thing as godlikeness (Adams 1999:18). Adams argues that while all goodness in human action is good in virtue of its resemblance to God's own nature, there remains a distinction between what is good and what is obligatory. Supererogatory acts are good acts that we can but are not obligated to do. Adams reasons that while the good transcends all social systems, what is obligatory arises out of social systems composed of various relationships (p. 232). At the heart of Adams's DCT is the notion that our obligations are constituted by requirements arising out of a social system in which God is the leading member.

In Adams's thinking, divine commands do not constitute the good, as that is grounded in God's goodness. Rather, divine commands make certain actions morally obligatory. In this way, divine commands provide the ethical framework for objective values and duties for moral agents (Adams 1999:250). This theory allows for both the possibility of doing good that God does not command and the obligatory nature of commands God does not intend people to follow, such as God's commanding of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (p. 260). Adams also argues that while the DCT implies that God communicates commands, it is consistent with a wide variety of ways those commands can be known by humans (p. 263).

C. Stephen Evans (2013) argues the DCT makes sense of the law-like character of moral obligations which humans experience. Moral obligations bring closure to moral reasoning, praise for succeeding in living out moral obligations, and guilt or blame when people fail to live out their moral obligations (p. 13–14). Because humans generally experience these features of moral obligations, while Evans believes moral obligations depend on God ontologically, he does not think one needs to believe in God in order to believe in moral obligations. He argues that an act God commands acquires a particular moral status in virtue of God's commanding it (p. 35), but he does not rule out the possibility of an act being bad even absent God's direct command. Thus, for Evans, a human may have good reasons not to steal, even absent God's command to "not steal", but God's command to refrain from taking other's possessions would add a new dimension to the action: namely, it would define that act as something that harms my relation to God.

Evans follows Adams in supposing that God's commands need not follow a particular means of communication. Evans believes God's commands may come in a variety of means: natural law, ecclesiastical bodies, social requirements, revelation, conscience, general revelation, etc. (Evans 2013:39–40). He reminds us that DCT is not a theory of the good, but merely stands on the foundation of a previously established theory of the good, providing a source for moral obligations (p. 90). Evans evaluates other ethical theories – Mackie's subjective theory of "ordinary morality", expressivism, constructivism, sensibility theories – and finds that while moral judgments wind up being true in some of these theories, they do not have a theory of the good on which the theory can stand (p. 118–54). Thus, these theories cannot answer the metaethical grounding question regarding the ultimate grounding for moral values and duties in the way the DCT can.

4.5.2 The biblical data for the divine command theory

Within the pages of the Old and New Testaments, one can find support for many of the points made by the theologians above. First, we can see

evidence of God giving commands and holding humans accountable for their enjoining of duties the commands create. Perhaps the quintessential commanding moment in the Bible comes in Exodus 20 with God's giving of the Ten Commandments. However, there are numerous other instances of God giving direct commands and holding people accountable for living out the duties prescribed by the command. For example, in Genesis 2, God commands Adam to avoid eating from one specific tree in the Garden and holds Adam accountable by punishing him when he transgresses that command.

We can also see evidence for Evans's point that God's commands can be expressed in a number of ways. The Bible maintains that God's law has been written on our hearts, and our conscience testifies to us that we have not lived in perfect accord with God's commands (Rom. 2:15) such that when we stand before God to be judged (Heb. 4:13, 8:8), we will not be surprised that we have broken God's law.

We can also see that the biblical authors did not simply equate social mores with God's law, though God's people ought to take civil societies' rules seriously. In the New Testament, Apostles command Christ's followers to be subject to governing authorities (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–15), while also recognizing a higher authority. Peter and John had become an annoyance to the religious leaders of their era because of their proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:2). They were brought before the council and charged to "not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (4:17). Peter and John answered, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:19–20). After being released, the Apostles lifted their voices to God in praise, quoting Psalm 2:1–2 (4:23–26). In this psalm, the Holy Spirit leads David to recognize that the civil authorities of the world plot and rage against God and his people. The Apostles concluded that while the civil authorities tried to suppress God's truth, their efforts were actually part of God's plan to expand his influence, and so they determined to continue to "speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31) despite the prohibition given to them. This was not the last run-in with the law for the Apostles.

After the Apostles gathered a following by preaching the gospel and carrying on a ministry of healing, the governing authorities arrested them and charged them to "not speak in the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:40). However, the Apostles "did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus" (Acts 5:42). Here the disciples followed the example of Jesus, "who accepts human authority as valid but subordinate to God's" (Keener 2013:1162).

Jesus' ethic in this regard can be seen in Luke 20:25, where he answers a question designed to "catch him in something he said" (Lk. 20:20). The scribes and the chief priest sent spies who pretended to be sincere, but who actually wanted to get Jesus in trouble with the civil authorities or with the general public. They asked, "Teacher…Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not?" (Lk. 20:21–22). This question was crafted to elicit an answer from Jesus that would either bring him into trouble with the Romans, who required the tax be paid, or with the Jewish populace, who did not want to pay the tax to the Romans. Their hope seems to have been to either alienate Jesus' support among the masses or to get the Romans to take action against Jesus (Morris 1988:305). Jesus asked for the coin used to pay the tax—a Roman silver coin which had the image of the Emperor stamped on it. Jews probably avoided using coins with images but could not avoid it in this case. Jesus asked about the likeness on the coin, and said, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Lk. 20:24). Jesus thus masterfully affirmed both Rome's authority to tax and our ultimate allegiance to God. On the one hand, the civil authorities "must be respected and its directions complied within the sphere that God allots it" (Morris 1988:306). Yet, on the other hand, Jesus also pointed out that our highest duties centre on God's will and design for us. Humans bear God's image, and just as we give to Caesar what bears his image, humans ought to give over to God that which bears his image – which is our very selves. In this way, Jesus affirmed civil government while pointing to a law above this law. It appears the disciples got the message and put it into practice in Acts 4 and 5.

Both the Old and New Testaments point to God as the ultimate lawgiver. While other authorities exist, and are even thought to be legitimate moral

authorities, God and his commands stand over all other authorities and are to be followed above any other duties one might have.

4.5.3 An objection to DCT: The Euthyphro dilemma revisited

A perennial difficulty for the moral argument generally (as discussed previously) and the DCT particularly stems from an argument raised by Plato, known as the Euthyphro dilemma (Dombrowski 2008:205; Levin 1989:25). In fact, it has been argued that the DCT is subject to the fatal logical objection found in the Euthyphro dilemma (Joyce 2002:49). This dilemma was introduced in a previous chapter in the context of defending the moral argument in general from the dilemma. In this portion of this work, I will address the Euthyphro dilemma in the context of a defence of the DCT.

Euthyphro claims that what all the gods love is holy and that what all the gods hate is unholy, to which Socrates asks his famous question, “Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?” (Plato 1966:1:10a). This question presents Euthyphro with a vexing dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is untenable for Euthyphro because it makes holiness independent from the gods. Holiness becomes a property the gods recognize and that does not originate in their will. Assenting to the second horn of the dilemma is tantamount to claiming that holy things are just those things that the gods happen to love. This too is untenable because it appears to make holiness arbitrary. Had the gods loved rape or murder, then those obviously heinous acts would have been holy. If one adopts the first horn and holds that God commands something because it is good, then that person has abandoned God as the source of objective moral values and duties and has instead supposed there to be a moral goodness that is independent of God. If, on the other hand, one adopts the second horn, there are several problems. First, it seems to render statements like “God is good” and “God’s actions are good” as tautologous and empty (Joyce 2002:56). Second, it implies that God deserves no praise for doing good. As Leibniz argued in his *Discourse on metaphysics II*, “Why praise [God] for what he has done if he would be equally

praiseworthy in doing just the contrary?" (Levin 1989:83). Third, it appears to make moral values and duties arbitrary, for if God had loved and commanded torture instead of compassion and self-giving love of others, then torture would have been good rather than extending compassion and love. These are indeed important objections, but, as I'll argue below, there are defeaters for these objections.

4.5.4 Guided Will Theory

Some philosophers have attempted to overcome the dilemma by addressing problematic aspects of one of the two horns (Dombroski 2008). Guided will theorists opt for the first horn of the dilemma (Levin 1989; Mouw 1970). Michael Levin, for example, argues that all of God's beliefs about the world are determined in some way by the truth of those beliefs (Levin 1989:92). God believes, for example, that there is a fire burning in my fireplace as I write this because there is in fact a fire burning in my fireplace. Levin believes that moral truths are no different and that God holds the moral beliefs he does because they are true. Levin argues that if God's independence is compromised by his knowledge of value (true objective moral facts that exist independent of God), then his independence would be equally compromised by his knowledge of the fire burning in my fireplace, for they both constitute independent facts that inform God's knowledge of things. This theory has the advantage of allowing God to be praiseworthy for his moral knowledge and for his commanding that which is good. God is the ideal observer with perfect knowledge of the good who points the way to goodness to humans who are epistemically cut off from the moral realm. Despite that gain, I believe this theory is plagued by several insurmountable difficulties.

First, this theory does not seem to escape the arbitrariness objection to the second horn of the dilemma. What constrains goodness to be what we consider good? Could goodness have been different, or indeed, could what is good have been what we now consider to be bad? The guided will theorist does

not have any guarantee that the good will not include things like rape and torture.

Joyce points out that the "because" in the statement "God loves x because it is morally good" seems problematic at first because we interpret that to mean "God loves x for the reason that it is morally good" (Joyce 2002:56). Rather, Joyce argues, the "because" may mean something more like, "in virtue of". God may love *x* in virtue of its moral goodness. Yet if goodness is independent of God and he comes to know the good, and so commands us to live in accordance with this standard, then it seems goodness could have required torturing and eating other people's babies for fun. There is nothing to constrain the good to be what we consider good. This is an example of what has been called the "modal vulnerability problem" (p. 56). Had the independent good included things like torturing and eating other people's babies for fun, then God would have been praiseworthy for enjoining or commanding such actions. Such heinous acts commanded by God would have been obligatory and objectively good, as objective morality would have been just whatever God loved in virtue of its being morally good.

A second problem for the guided will theorist is that identifying goodness independent of God seems to undermine one's confidence that God is perfectly good. If it is not in God's nature to be good, from whence does God's goodness come? If the guided will theory is correct, then God's goodness consists only in his perfect alliance with an external standard. But this gives us no guarantee that God is good. It may be that God only aligns himself with moral goodness some of the time. We do not seem to be in a good position to judge God's adherence to the external standard, and so if objective moral values exist independently of God, our ability to know that God is good is undermined. If we are sceptical about God's being good, then we will likely also be sceptical about God's commands being good. It seems the guided will theorist is left without being able to praise God as morally good, as that would require our own independent assessment of God's adherence to the good. Nor does the guided will theorist seem to have confidence that the commands of God are good, since he may not be representing the moral truth perfectly.

4.5.5 Pure will theory

Those who instead take the second horn of the Euthyphro dilemma are known as “pure will theorists,” or “theological voluntarists”. This position, embodied most fully by William of Ockham, appears to understand God’s commands (and thus morality) to be arbitrary in the sense that whatever God happens to command is good. For the theological voluntarist, God’s commands constitute moral goodness and thus establish what is objectively morally good. This theory appears to make moral goodness arbitrary in that God could have issued any commands, in which case such things as rape and torture could have been objectively morally good. Opting for this horn of the dilemma has two major objections (William Alston 2002:285). First, it appears empty to praise God for his moral goodness if what he wills is simply the Good; he could not have done otherwise because the Good is simply whatever he wills. Secondly, this view appears to make objective morality arbitrary, as God could command anything and it would be considered “good”.

Joyce has argued that it is not a bare tautology to say that God is good even if one is a pure will theorist. If God’s commands define the good, then claiming God is good may mean that God always acts in accordance with his own commands, which is not an empty statement. It is certainly possible for people to issue commands without following them, and claiming that God acts in accord with his commands is certainty praiseworthy (Joyce 2002:60). To do otherwise would be hypocritical, and God’s goodness, in this case, may mean that he is not a hypocrite with regard to moral goodness.

The far more difficult problem for the pure will theorist is the seemingly arbitrary nature of God’s commands. If moral goodness is just what God commands, and God may command anything at all, then it appears that if God commanded the torture and eating of other people’s babies for fun, then that act would be morally good. This implication seems to rob any content from the word “good” because what is good could be just anything, including what we take to be abhorrent. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong reminds the theist that it is not enough to

simply claim that God would never command such evil things. He says that the DCT theorist “cannot appeal to the wrongness of rape in order to show that God could never command rape” because “the whole point of the DCT is to deny any such independent standard of moral wrongness” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:106).

Robert Adams’s (1999) divine command theory is a less extreme form of theological voluntarism than Ockham’s and represents a solid voluntarist option. Adams addresses the problem of arbitrariness in the context of examining God’s command to Abraham to kill his son Isaac. In Adams’s work, the command of God is obligatory, but not necessarily good. God, it should be remembered, commands Abraham to refrain from killing Isaac prior to the act being accomplished. For Adams, God’s nature is the good, and God’s commands are what are obligatory. Thus, for Adams, God can command anything, and anything God commands is obligatory, but not all that God commands is necessarily good. Adams holds a sort of modified pure will theory such that the good is tied to God’s nature, even if he is free to command otherwise. This theory actually has more in common with those in the next section who, rather than opting for one horn or another, choose to split the horns of the dilemma.

4.5.6 Splitting the horns of the dilemma

A true dilemma will take the form “either *A* or not *A*”. The Euthyphro dilemma is not in that form. Instead, the Euthyphro is in the form “either *A* or *B*”. In this case the defender of the moral argument may argue for neither *A* or *B*, but rather *C*. Taking this route, some defenders of the moral theistic argument have sought a solution to the dilemma by suggesting that the Euthyphro is not a true dilemma and that there is a third option (Copan 2013:93). Often this takes the form of identifying the good not in what God commands, but in God’s nature. In this case, what is morally good is rooted in God’s nature, and God’s will or commands flow necessarily from that good nature. God’s commands are necessarily good, and they are not arbitrary, for they are constrained by God’s nature.

It could be argued that this view makes God's perfection or goodness vacuous because it appears that on this account, whatever God commands is good, and therefore goodness could be compatible with the worst sorts of things imaginable. This has sometimes been called the vacuity objection. I am sympathetic to this objection and think it has merit with regard to bare theism. However, the Christian theist is arguing for a DCT that grounds morality not in any god, but in the God of the Old and New Testaments. This God is essentially good, and his commands are constrained not by some independent being, but by his own essence. What we call moral goodness is simply acting in the character and likeness of God.

Sinnott-Armstrong extends his arbitrariness objection to God's nature, claiming that if God's nature had been different, say to enjoy torturing people's babies for fun, then his commands would flow from his nature and would still command evil things. Thus, for Sinnott-Armstrong, appealing to God's nature does not appear to solve the arbitrariness objection. If God's nature had been different, we might have had all sorts of obviously evil things being considered "good" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009:106). Baggett and Walls offer a rejoinder to this sort of argument. They argue that what made Euthyphro so vulnerable to Socrates's criticism was that Euthyphro's gods were morally deficient (Baggett and Walls 2011:50). However, they argue that the Christian concept of God is one of maximal excellence. The God of Christian theism is not fickle and capricious like the Greek gods. God just is the ultimate transcendent good. The Christian God is also thought to be necessary, that is, existing as himself in every possible world. Thus, the God of Christian theism is not open to Sinnott-Armstrong's extended arbitrariness objection.

Sinnott-Armstrong would like to keep the pressure on the theist by arguing that even if God could not (due to his nature) ever command us to rape, still if he did, then we would have a moral obligation to rape. This may be trivially true in the same way that saying if it were the case that $2 + 2 = 5$ then $2 + 2 \neq 4$. That is trivially true, but nonsensical, just as saying that if God's necessary nature had been other than it is, then the morals that flow from that nature could have been different (Baggett and Walls 2011:133).

4.5.7 Summary of the Euthyphro objection

Theists espousing a version of the DCT have several options open to them. They could adopt a pure will line of thought and simply equate moral goodness with what God commands. In that case, such theists might agree that if God commands what we would consider heinous acts, then those acts would be morally good and obligatory. Morality would be objective, and God would serve as the grounding of objective moral values and duties. A more acceptable voluntarism is that advocated by Adams, who sees God's nature as the good and God's commands as dictating the right and obligatory. Theists can also opt for splitting the horns of the dilemma at a deeper level and claim that God's nature is necessarily good, and that his nature constrains his commands such that he only commands what is ultimately good. In this case, God is the grounding for objective moral values and duties pointed to by the moral argument. By contrast, the guided will theory does not appear to escape the arbitrariness objection. Thus, the Euythphro objection does not seem to present an insurmountable obstacle to either the DCT or the moral argument for God's existence.

4.6 Answering two other objections to the DCT

Even after the DCT has answered the vacuity and ambiguity objections related to the Euthyphro dilemma, there remain several other major objections to DCT. Two notable objections may be called the "infantile" and "prior obligations" objections.

John Chandler has pointed out that the DCT seems to violate the requirement of the moral autonomy of the believer (Chandler 1984:443). Similarly, James Rachels argues that in adopting DCT, a person abandons one's role as a moral agent. Rather than pursuing moral reasoning and living according to conscience, DCT adherents appears to blindly follow God's directions no matter what they are (Rachels 1981:44). Robert Adams is sensitive to this view. He recognizes that autonomy is often seen as characteristic of

moral maturity, and DCT is at times censured as immature or even “infantile” (Adams 1999:270). The thinking seems to be that it is better to do good because one cares about the good rather than because it is commanded. Yet, as Adams points out, it does not follow that the introduction of divine commands in ethics debases our motivation in well-doing (p. 274). God being the ground for objective moral goodness does not favour abstract concern for duty. Rather, the moral agent is free to seek the “reasons for accepting a controlling role for God’s commands in true goods about which one is invited to care independently of the commands”. Far from obedience to God’s commands being simply deference to a powerful authority, God’s commands are rooted in his goodness, and so our obedience to God’s commands can be seen as thoughtful and reasonable as we seek perfect moral goodness (Baggett and Walls 2011:128). God has reasons for issuing his commands in virtue of his good nature, and we have reasons for obeying God’s commands as we pursue moral goodness. This pursuit of moral goodness respects the moral autonomy of the person and allows for moral growth into a mature moral actor.

C. Stephen Evans reports an objection to DCT offered by Ralph Cudworth. Cudworth argued that humans seem to have a moral obligation to obey God that holds antecedently or independently of divine commands, and thus is not grounded in DCT (Evans 2014:99). Evans responds to this objection, sometimes called the prior obligations objection, by noting that to claim that we have a prior obligation to obey God is simply a different way of saying that God has moral authority. God’s having moral authority is what obligates us to obey his commands, but there is no extra antecedent obligation required to obey one with moral authority. To say God has moral authority is just to say that “he has the right to issue commands that ought to be obeyed” (Evans 2014:99). DCT argues that all moral truths are linked to God’s commands. To say that one ought to satisfy one’s moral obligations is just another way of saying that we are genuinely obligated by God’s commands as coming from one who has moral authority (p. 100).

4.7 Summary of objections to DCT

The divine command theorist who argues for the existence of God by way of the moral argument seems to be in a good position to do so. God's nature can be thought of as the ultimate source of goodness in the universe. In this way, goodness and moral values, like a thing's being good or evil, are objective. Our duties can be thought of as flowing from commands of God however they are communicated. This does not preclude humans from being rational agents who seek the good for goodness' sake. Rather, with God's nature being the grounding for objective moral good, humans are able to pursue objective good and to fight against objective evil in the world as autonomous and rational agents. The divine command theory appears to be cohesive to both the moral argument in general and to Christian teachings about the nature of God more specifically.

4.8 Defensive case introduction

Paul Copan reports that many of the "New Atheists" raise objections about "strange and harsh Old Testament laws, a god of jealousy and anger, slavery, and the killing of Canaanites" (Copan 2011:19). Copan highlights New Atheist authors like Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, who charge God with immoral acts such as genocide, child abuse, chattel slavery, and abuse of women, including even rape. Graham Oppy does not believe the Bible to be morally excellent, even if it has some "morally admirable precepts" (Oppy 2006:362). Oppy finds at best a mix of admirable and morally repugnant commands. He opines, "[S]criptures contain edicts that, by widespread contemporary moral standards, are barbarous, or strange, or worse". The moral argument claims that God is the grounding of objective moral values and duties. If, as the New Atheists and other philosophers argue, the Christian God issues commands that violate intuitive moral values and duties, can the Christian God be the God the moral argument points toward?

It would take this paper in a whole new direction to attempt to show how the many verses cited by critics do not disqualify the God of the Bible as the God

described by the moral argument for God's existence. However, I will consider several examples of such texts, explaining why they should not be considered defeaters for the belief that the God described in the Old and New Testaments is the God described by the moral argument.

4.8.1 Description verses prescription

There are various places in the Bible where, critics allege, God appears to violate clear moral principles. Several websites are dedicated to highlighting perceived atrocities God is thought to have committed in the pages of Christian scripture.[4]

Many popular criticisms of the biblical God's morality fail to take into account that not everything that the Bible reports is prescribed by God.[5] The Bible does in fact report many disturbing events. However, many of those events are not enjoined or prescribed by God but are merely described as having occurred. While an atheist may worry about God's allowing of any evil at all, examples of evildoing in the Bible do not necessarily mean that the God of the Bible acts in an immoral way.

Neither should the Christian theist be worried by instances where people act in ways that do not line up with perceived norms, as in 2 Chronicles 15:12–13. The editor at www.evilbible.com erroneously believes this passage constitutes a command for God's people to murder non-believers. The text does report that the Israelites committed themselves to God and to putting to death those who would not seek the Lord. This passage describes their zeal but does not point to their actions being prescribed or even commended by God. Examples of this kind could be multiplied, as there are many things described in the Bible that God does not mean for us to understand to be commanded or commended by him.

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[4] For example: www.evilbible.com; https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/reasons-humanists-reject-bible (accessed 10/3/19).

[5] https://infidels.org/library/modern/donald_morgan/atrocity.html (accessed 10/3/19).

4.8.2 Hyperbole in the conquest

A more serious threat to the Christian God's morality comes in the wake of the conquest of Canaan. The claim that God commands the genocidal extermination of the inhabitants of Canaan forms a centrepiece of Raymond Bradley's "Moral Argument for Atheism" (Bradley 2003). As Bradley and others have noted, a number of texts call for Israel to devote entire people groups or cities to destruction. Matthew Flannagan responds to this type of argument by demonstrating the language used in the conquest accounts to be hyperbolic.

Following Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Reading Joshua" (2010), Flannagan points out that "a careful reading of the text in its literary context makes it implausible to interpret it as claiming that Yahweh ordered extermination" (Flannagan 2012:227). For example, taken literally, the biblical book of Joshua states that Israel conquered the whole of the land of Canaan, yet the book of Judges reports that much of the land was unconquered. Further, the text of Joshua mentions specific cities where he supposedly left no survivors (Josh. 10:38–40). However, Judges 1:9–11 reports that Canaanites remained in those same cities at the opening of the time of the Judges. Considerations such as these make it likely that these "extermination" texts should not be taken literally and that they are better seen as stylistic and hyperbolic.

Flannagan also points out that the language used in Joshua to describe the conquest of Canaan is "full of ritualistic, stylized, formulaic language" (Flannagan 2012:234). This language helps the modern reader appreciate that the text should not be interpreted literally but as an Ancient Near Eastern military account. Such accounts are full of hyperbolic and highly figurative rhetoric. Victories are described as "complete annihilation and destruction of the enemy, killing everyone, leaving no survivors, and so on" (p. 237). In fact, there exist several accounts from the Ancient Near East that describe victories over Israel in the same sorts of hyperbolic language. Mesha, king of Moab, boasts that "Israel has utterly perished for always," and the Mereneptah Stele describes Israel as "wasted" and "without remaining seed" (p. 238). Israel's continued existence

highlights the stylized, hyperbolic language used by victors in the Ancient Near East. Joshua uses similar phraseology, figurative language, and hyperbole to describe the conquest, much as other military leaders of the Ancient Near East described their victories. Further, language used in other places in the Old Testament trends toward "driving out" rather than absolute termination (Copan and Flannagan 2014:76–82).[6] This evidence should lead one to conclude that though Joshua did in fact wage war on Canaanites, it was not genocidal.

4.8.3 Utterly Destroy (*herem*)

Some biblical scholars have recently taken a closer look at just what God was commanding Joshua and the Israelites to do to the nations they were dispossessing during the conquest. They note the verb *herem* is at the heart of the debate. John and J. Harvey Walton have recently argued that "the common English translations of the Hebrew word *herem* (ASV 'utterly destroy'; NIV 'destroy totally'; CEB 'place under the ban'; NET 'utterly annihilate'; ESV 'devote to destruction') are misleading because they imply that the word specifies something that happens to the object" rather than getting to the heart of the purpose of *herem* (Walton and Walton 2017:169–77). Their work is a much-needed corrective to common interpretive moves such as equating *herem* with human sacrifices, genocide, or the call for destruction of all life in warfare (cf. Gundry 2003).[7] Often things that are *herem* are destroyed, but destruction is not at the heart of *herem* because not everything that is *herem* is destroyed (p. 171). In Leviticus 27:21, a field that is *herem* is not destroyed but becomes the property of priests. The field is removed from human use and given over to God for his administration. That seems to be the heart of the verb. Destruction, "when it occurs, is a means to an end" (p. 170).

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[6] See Exod. 23:27–31; Numb. 21:32, 33:51–56; Deut. 7:17–23.

[7] In Gundry 2003, C.S. Cowels equates *herem* to "human sacrifice" (36). Eugene Merrill sees the verb calling for "genocide" (94), and Daniel Gard, while somewhat nuanced, finds that in the context of warfare *herem* means "the destruction of all life" (116). Tremper Longman III notes that the verb is "notoriously hard to translate" and captures more of what Walton and Walton identify as the heart behind *herem*, seeing the word involving "consecration," or the giving over of things to God (163).

In the conquest narratives, inanimate objects are *herem* (Josh. 6:17) by being removed from human use, such as consecrating the metal objects to God for his use in the sanctuary (Josh. 6:19, 24). Living humans are *herem* in the conquest, removing them from usefulness as slaves. The people are not to be used as plunder and are killed not for the purpose of "making them dead but to remove them from use as slaves" (Walton and Walton 2017:173). The Gibeonites, who are *herem* but whom the Israelites were not allowed to kill, are not to be used as slaves, and so they are made to serve as wood cutters and drawers of water associated with the "altar of the Lord" (Josh. 9:27).

Walton and Walton note that the heart of the *herem* against nations is not a command to kill every person of that nation, but to destroy their national identity. The *herem* in those cases has nothing to do with bloodline and everything to do with removing that nation's identity from use so that Israel cannot make use of it (p. 191). God recognizes that the nations around them represent "snares and traps" (Josh. 23:13; Judg. 2:3) and will lead Israel into syncretistic compromise, which will subject Israel to the covenant curses. To accomplish *herem* in this case, it is not necessary for every human in that nation to be killed. If it had, then the Deuteronomy 7:3 prohibition against intermarriage would not have been necessary (Walton and Walton 2017:193). What *herem* seems to indicate in the conquest is turning over territory to God for him to administer (pp. 223–225). This meant the land was not Israel's, but as God makes clear in Leviticus 25:23, "The Land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me". *Herem*, it seems, does not require genocide, and indeed, the driving out of the people is an equally effective strategy that Israel employed. What was required was Israel's capturing land (including cities) and turning it over to God free from other national identities. Even if *herem* does not mean wholesale killing of innocent people through genocide, is the command for Israel to kill at all justified?

4.8.4 A morally sufficient reason defence and theodicy

While the Old Testament command to conquer surrounding nations and subject them to *herem* is limited both by geography (promised land) and time (to those generations around Moses and Joshua), that it occurred at all still bothers some readers of the Old Testament, even given that the conquest language was largely hyperbolic and that the command for *herem* was not implying genocide. Baggett and Walls advise that when confronted by "some alleged or hypothetical command by God or state of affairs allowed by God, we should ask if we can identify a possibly true proposition, consistent with God's moral perfection rationally construed, that would potentially entail such a command or state of affairs" (Baggett and Walls 2011:136). In this vein, Copan and Flannagan argue that even the command to kill innocent people can be coherently attributed to a morally perfect God as long as "the command to kill innocent human beings is understood as a rare exception to the normal rule against homicide which God issues for some greater good or purpose" (Copan and Flannagan 2014:207).

While certainly killing innocent people for fun is wrong, Copan and Flannagan point to situations where killing innocent people might be justified. For example, most people will assent to the shooting down of a passenger plane which has been hijacked by terrorists and will be flown into a highly populated area even though so doing will kill several hundred innocent men, women, and children (Copan and Flannagan 2014:199). It is certainly possible that God has morally sufficient reasons for commanding Israel to occupy the "promised land". While God does not specify his reasons in depth, we should remember that our vantage point for issuing a judgment on God's commands as finite humans is not an ideal one. Our moral judgments can be fallible and our "moral judgments change over time as we gain a better understanding of relevant considerations in making moral judgments" (p. 192). Romans 11:33–35 and Isaiah 55:8–9 remind us that we are not in a good position to know the reasons an omnipotent and omniscient God has for commanding certain things.

While God does not indicate all of his reasons for commanding Israel to conquer the promised land, we can see glimpses of what may be part of his reasoning in his warnings about what will happen to Israel if they do not carry out

the conquest. He warns them that failure could mean the destruction of Israel's distinctive identity as Israel is drawn into the practices of the nations that occupied the promised land (Deut. 7:2–4; 20:16–18). By way of a defence, then, we can see that God's being morally perfect is not necessarily contradicted by his command that Israel conquer the promised land. It might be that he has reasons we do not and may not ever fully grasp.

We may also be able to identify some reasons that serve as a theodicy, that is, plausible reasons for God commanding the use of conquest (even if they are not all his actual reasons). One can see a redemptive historical reason for God's commands as Israel preserved would fulfil God's promises that: 1) an offspring of woman would crush the offspring of the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15), 2) in Abraham's seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3), and 3) although Israel was not alive yet, eventually a "star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel" who would bring victory over Israel's enemies (Numb. 24:17). None of these promises was fulfilled by Joshua's time, nor could they ever be fulfilled if Israel was not preserved. In the light of the New Testament's witness, we see that Jesus is the seed of woman who crushes the head of the serpent, the seed of Abraham who brings blessing to all the families of the earth, and the star rising out of Jacob who rules God's people forever. In God's preserving Israel, we see him making a way for sinners to be redeemed. We can see God preserving a people so "at the fullness of time" God would send forth his son who knew no sin to become sin for us, transferring us out of the domain of darkness and into his kingdom, not as slaves but as sons (Gal. 4:4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Col. 1:13; Rom. 8:15). This great good comes to humanity only as God's people are preserved. If we suppose that "God knew that unless he were to command the Israelites to wipe out their enemies, they themselves would be wiped out" (Baggett and Walls 2011:138) and that Israel was "God's chosen vessel to provide a way of salvation to the world—including those who would be wiped out" in the attacks, then we can see how a loving God, seeking the salvation of humanity, could command the Israelite conquest of the promised land (p. 140).

4.8.5 Slavery in the Bible

Sam Harris points out that “the entire civilized world now agrees that slavery is an abomination” (Harris 2007:14). Harris looks at several texts from the Old Testament that seem to show that “the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves”. Harris finds that “nothing in Christian theology remedies the appalling deficiencies of the Bible on what is perhaps the greatest – and the *easiest* – moral question our society has ever had to face” (p. 18). Does the Bible in fact endorse slavery?

As noted above, there are times when the Bible describes actions without prescribing them. God may at times even speak to limit harm in situations without giving his blessing to the activity more generally. This may be the case with a text like Exodus 21:7–11 where God protects a woman slave from trafficking by ensuring her rights as a wife and daughter are taken seriously. This distinction between description and prescription may be at the heart of Ephesians 6, in which Paul urges slaves to obey their masters and slave masters to treat their slaves well. This need not imply that God is endorsing the practice as much as speaking Christian wisdom to one who comes to faith and finds themselves in that social setting.

Secondly, it should be noted that slavery in the Old Testament period and in the New Testament period was not equivalent to slavery in the U.S. antebellum South. It should not be assumed that all ancient slaves were treated poorly. In fact, slavery, for some, was entered into willingly as an improvement in their social standing, and ancient slavery was absent the racial overtones of slavery in the United States of America (Garland 1998:349). Another difference is that slaves in the ancient world were often encouraged to gain an education, as this was thought to enhance the slave’s value to the slave owner (p. 350). Further, unlike slaves in the U.S. prior to the Civil War, slaves in the Roman world could own property (Copan 2011:151) and were not purely used for agricultural labour but could perform numerous different tasks. For example, the Roman government held many “slaves who served as civil servants throughout the empire, some in rather prestigious roles and capacities” (Witherington III 1995:182). Finally, “most ancient slaves did not think of their slavery as a

permanent condition" (Garland 1998:350) and, after saving tips and allowances or after starting a business of their own (Copan 2011:151), many were able to "buy their freedom" or would be released at a given age (typically 30 years old) (Garland 1998:350). One inscription found in Corinth, which was a significant centre for buying and selling slaves in the New Testament era, "tells of a slave freed by a prestigious family, one Quintus Maecius Cleogenes, who rose high enough to marry his master's granddaughter" (Witherington III 1995:181).

Slavery in the Old Testament was even more distinct from antebellum slavery. An impoverished family could "sell" themselves to another (Lev. 25:47), but it was understood this relationship would only last until somebody else redeemed the family from this servant position, the debt was paid off, or the year of Jubilee arrived (Lev. 25:25–54). Copan notes, "[T]his servanthood wasn't imposed by an outsider" and once the servant was released, he was "free to pursue his own livelihood without any further obligations within that household" (Copan 2011:126). Slavery in the Old Testament stands in contrast to other social structures in that Hebrew law recognized slaves as human beings subject to defence from intolerable acts (Dandamayev 1992). This valuation of slaves as persons of value in the Old Testament stands in stark contrast to other Ancient Near Eastern law codes in which offenses against slaves were prosecuted on the same level as property crimes (Copan 2008:18). The personhood of slaves in the Old Testament precluded kidnapping a person to sell as a slave (Ex. 21:16, Deut. 24:7), prescribed the injunction to release injured servants (Ex. 21:20–1, 26–27), held out a promised safe harbour to runaway slaves (Deut. 23:15–16), and prescribed penalties for harsh treatment of servants (Ex. 21:20). Copan sees many of the texts describing slavery in Israel as attempts to "regulate and control potential abuses" (Copan 2011:146). Deuteronomy 15:1–18 actually spells out God's social ideal for Israel, which includes freedom from debt, so that there will "be no poor among you". This ideal included the freedom of all Israelites who had sold themselves into debt servanthood.

It is important to understand that the New Testament does speak toward slavery in a critical manner in several ways. First, Paul's exhortation to masters would have been outrageous in the first-century world (O'Brien 1999:454). No

other known non-biblical writer of the ancient world goes as far as Paul does when describing the responsibilities masters have to slaves (Keener 2014:553). He urges masters to treat slaves as persons governed by a heavenly master, implying that both the slave and the earthly master serve the same heavenly master (Eph. 6:9). The slave was to be seen as the master's brother or sister in the faith, and so full of dignity. Secondly, in 1 Timothy 1:9–10, Paul condemns slave traders as ones who steal what is not theirs, implying that one cannot own a person (cf. Rev. 18:11–13). While not calling for a slave revolt, Paul did call on slaves to gain their freedom if they were able (1 Cor. 7:20) and called on Philemon to free Onesimus from slavery (Phlm. 15–17).[8]

Still though, as Sam Harris points out, there are Old Testament texts, such as Leviticus 25:44–46, in which God seems to endorse slavery (Harris 2007:14–15). Yet even in this passage, which seems to allow for slavery, there is a subtext which reveals slavery's perversion. Leviticus 25:26 outlaws slavery of other Israelites, while the slavery which was allowed reflects "an understanding of the reasons for poverty" and an effort to deal non-violently with those who became slaves as the result of warfare (Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas 2000:140). It is important to see that Leviticus 25:44–46 does not prescribe or even encourage slavery, but regulates it and should be seen as an accommodation of Ancient Near Eastern customs of that era. Similarly, Jesus said that divorce was permitted because of the hardness of the Israelites' heart' (Matt. 19:8). Still, Israel's laws made it a crime to mistreat slaves (Ex. 23:9). and there is a host of laws given which protected slaves from the negative treatment common in the ancient world (Ex. 21:20–27).

[8] Many commentators see Paul's request of Philemon to require him to take the legal step to emancipate Onesimus (Bruce 1984:217; Garland 1998:335; Keener 2014:633; Moo 2008:424). However, some see Paul's call to welcome Onesimus back as a brother to imply nothing about a change in Onesimus's legal status (Wright 1986:185; Barth and Blanke 2000:410–55). In any case, it is clear that Paul instructs Philemon to relate to Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother. Onesimus is to be viewed as a valued partner in ministry, and as a human redeemed by Jesus. Even if the legal status did not change, Philemon's relationship with Onesimus would have to change, and this would serve as an example to all Christian slaveholders.

4.9 Summary of the defensive case

This section began by pointing out that while the Bible does contain depictions of events and actions that many find horrific, this does not mean that God condones, commends, or commands such action. That said, there do seem to be places where God is thought to command actions that do not appear to be good.

Many have seen God's commands associated with the conquest of Canaan to comprise such commands. We saw that those accusations do not hold up for two reasons. First, they appear to be in line with standard Ancient Near Eastern talk by victors, which we know to be hyperbolic and highly figurative. Second, recent exploration of the word *herem* has revealed that the term was not calling for genocide or even utter destruction, but for Israel to devote the spoils of victory to God and to destroy national identities rather than every individual of a nation.

I also explored several passages from the Bible that deal with slavery. Scholars have noted that the Bible gave protections and value to slaves far beyond other nations of the Ancient Near East and the U.S. antebellum South. Further, slavery was not considered the ideal and was allowed as a cultural accommodation. Further still, the New Testament appears to suggest God's displeasure with slavery as an institution; the Apostle Paul seemingly calls for Onesimus' release and reception as a brother in Christ.

In the end, there does not appear to be any scripture where I find a command of God or an action he undertakes wherein God could not have a justifiable reason for commanding the act or undertaking the action. While we may be able to find justifying reasons for some of the things God does, due to our limited nature, we should not expect to be able to discern God's justifying reasons for everything he does or commands. For the above reasons, it seems to me the biblical data does not preclude the God described in the pages of the Old and New Testaments being the God described by the moral argument for God's existence.

4.10 Summary of biblical theology in support of the moral argument

We began this chapter by noting that to be persuasive, the Christian theist utilizing the moral argument needs to show that what the argument entails is compatible with Christian revelation and that this harmonization has both a positive and a defensive element. On the positive side, the Christian using the moral argument as evidence for the existence of God should demonstrate that the metaphysical requirements of the moral argument are at home in the Christian theistic worldview. The moral argument points to a link between God and objective morality. The argument claims that God is the final standard for objective moral values and duties. The Christian theist using the argument needs to demonstrate that the God who has revealed himself in the Old and New Testaments and in the person and work of Jesus Christ could be that standard. In this chapter, I hope to have adequately demonstrated that the God revealed in the Bible is the standard of moral values and duties. God's nature is the Good and so he is the source of all moral values. Divine commands then map out duties for which human agents are accountable to God. Having established a biblical basis for God being the locus of objective moral values and duties and holding free humans accountable for fulfilling their duties, I turned to several objections that have been raised against the God of the Bible's compatibility with the moral argument.

On the negative side, I noted that an objector may point to elements within the revealed components of the Christian tradition that cast doubt on God being the source of objective moral values and duties. I highlighted several issues, including the claim that God in the Bible promotes slavery and genocide. In each case, I hope to have demonstrated that the texts do not point to clear cases of God commanding immoral acts. I also worked to show that there may be cases where God is justified in commanding things or acting in ways in which his justifying reasons are obfuscated. In sum, it does not appear to me that the objector has solid grounds to disqualify the God of the Bible being a candidate for the God of the moral argument.

Chapter five: God in classical theism and Mormon thought

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have presented the moral argument for God's existence (chap. 2), defended it against philosophical objections (chap. 3), and shown that it is consistent with the biblical view of God (chap. 4). The present chapter will describe and contrast the classical conception of the Christian God with Mormon conceptions of God. The view of God known as classical theism "has long been the orthodox theistic position of all branches of the Christian church: Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox" (Beckwith 1998:51). This conception will be juxtaposed with the three major views of God in Mormon thought identified in the first chapter. The next chapter will evaluate whether the Mormon concepts of God are compatible with the moral argument for God's existence.

5.2 Christian conception of God

Several attributes of the God of traditional Christianity have become clear over the past several chapters. In particular, God's aseity and his being the grounding for objective moral values and duties have been highlighted. Much more can be said. Anselm of Canterbury gives a good shorthand for defining the God of traditional Christian theism when he explains that God is "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" (Anselm 1939:10). Anselm, in this short description of God, points to a being which scripture reveals to be the best, the greatest, and highest of all beings. Of course, this concept of God does not preclude the existence of other beings, physical or spiritual. God, however, is metaphysically unique and incomparable. Psalm 29:1 calls on other heavenly beings to ascribe the glory and strength due to the Lord. Psalm 89:6–7 asks the question, "Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy and awesome above all who are around him". In the biblical world, though there are

human and spiritual beings of great honour and power, none compares to the honour, power, and glory of God.

God is incomparable to other beings in that his power surpasses all and, more importantly, he is the sole creator of all that has come into being. Isaiah 43:6 reminds us that God created all that began to exist for his glory. Isaiah 45:11 tells us that God stretched out the heavens, commanded all their host, made the earth, and formed humans on it. Isaiah 45:7–8 remind us that God formed light, darkness, and the whole order in the world that allows for life. The biblical God is unaided in creation. In Isaiah 44:24, God is emphatic that he (God) who formed each us of from the womb, “alone stretched out the heavens” and “spread out the earth by [himself]”. The God of Christian theism is the greatest conceivable being—a metaphysically unique being full of power, wisdom, knowledge, and being itself. As the source of all being, he is the only self-sufficient, eternal, and necessary being (Beckwith 2001:12).

Further, beyond merely bringing into existence all that began to exist (Jn. 1:1-3; Heb. 1:10), Hebrews 1:3 declares that God also “upholds the universe by the word of his power”. God is the maker and sustainer of all that has come into being. This creating and sustaining God, though personal, is not a physical being who takes up space, but is omnipresent. God is spirit (Jn. 4:24), and for that reason we cannot escape his presence or purview (Ps. 139:7). Yet this God is not an impersonal force; rather, God is a self-conscious, reasoning, and just being who invites human creatures to stand in a loving relationship with him.

While God exists eternally as one being, that one being has eternally existed tri-personally. God reveals himself to us in the Bible as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Old and New Testaments tell us that there is only one God that exists, but in the Bible, there are three persons for whom the title God is appropriate. These persons share the glory, honour, titles, attributes, and worth of God. These are not three Gods, but three persons who each participate fully in the being of the one eternal God. Each person is co-eternal and consubstantial with the other persons.

These three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are the one God. The term "trinity", while not a biblical term, is shorthand for this understanding of God.

Some have charged this classical concept of God as owing too much to pagan Greek thought (Ostler 2001:27). BYU theologian Robert Millet believes "the doctrine of the Trinity represents a superimposition of Hellenistic philosophy on the Bible" (Millet 2011a:352). LDS Apostle Dallin H. Oaks testifies that he believes in a Godhead composed of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and that the LDS teaching is that these "three members of the Godhead are three separate and distinct beings" (Oaks 1995). Traditional Christian teaching is that these three members are one God and one being. Oaks claims this Trinitarian tradition is "evidence of the falling away [those in the LDS Church] call the great apostasy," and that this falling away is "attributable to the ideas of Greek philosophy".[18]

While many Christian thinkers have, over the history of Christian thought, "employed in varying degrees the language, categories and arguments found in pagan traditions" (Beckwith 2001:16), the Christian concept of God as incomparable, personal, omnipresent, incorporeal, and Trinitarian is unique and distinct from Greek thought. The early church fathers did not "bring in the doctrine of the Trinity from elsewhere and then [show] how the phrases of Scripture can be drawn out" to fit the doctrine (Sanders 2016:82). Rather, they argued that the concept of God as Trinity expresses the "true meaning of the words of Scripture". What early Christians thought about God was not determined by Greek thinking about God; rather, it was shaped by the being and attributes of God revealed in the Scriptures. While the language used to express the Trinitarian view was not drawn directly from the Bible, the concept itself is deeply rooted in scripture, not Greek thought.

Some of God's attributes are shared with humans. Examples of these communicable attributes may include things like God's justice, truthfulness,

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[18] In his earlier work, Blake Ostler has argued this point as well (Ostler 1984:65).

goodness, love, and grace. These are attributes of God that God intends for human creatures to exemplify. God has, in fact, predestined that those whom he foreknew to be his in Christ would be conformed to the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29). Not only are Christians holy in God's sight in light of Christ's atonement (Col. 1:22), but God is also at work in the Christian's life to bring the follower of Christ to the holiness of his image (2 Cor. 3:18, Eph. 4:22-23, Phil. 2:12–13).

This work of becoming like God in various ways, both now and in glory, ought not give the impression that the line between creature and creator is blurry. God, making us in his image and enabling us to partake in his nature (2 Pet. 1:4) through his communicable attributes, does not suggest we can be like him in the order of being. Humans can be like God in the sense of exemplifying some of his attributes, embracing his kingdom, his will, and enjoining activities of which he approves. However, the biblical God is incomparable and will always remain as such. It is not a matter of degree that separates us; our differences are on the order of kind. This is another way of saying, as theologians do, that in addition to God's communicable attributes, God also has incommunicable attributes (Samples 2007:141–51), that is, attributes God does not share with humans. Among God's incommunicable attributes are his aseity, immutability, infinitude, omnipresence, omnipotence, eternality, and tri-personality.

Theologians over the history of Christian thought have looked at scriptural verses like Psalm 82:6 and 2 Peter 1:4 in wonder. They have, all the way back to patristic times, described what God reveals about humans in these passages as *theosis*, or "deification". It is also clear that what was meant by these terms is not that humans may become like God in every way. Theologians, using *theos* in an attributive sense, have taught that those persons who are born again and adopted into God's family are on a trajectory toward glory as immortal, holy, incorruptible, embodied, resurrected beings, living forever in the image of God as God intended us to live. Being "like God" expressed that sort of existence, but this thinking, to be sure, stops short of claiming God's children will be like God in every way.

Theologians from the patristic times and following who have embraced and reflected on *theosis* have also clearly expressed God's ontological uniqueness (Mosser 2005:44). These theologians saw that God differs in kind, not merely in degree, from all other existent beings (p. 44). What God has in store for redeemed humans is truly glorious and can be described as "deification" in the sense that we are made like God in certain limited ways. However, neither the biblical witness nor orthodox Christian theologians hold that humans, or any being for that matter, will ever be like God in the full sense. God remains metaphysically unique.

This then, is a snapshot of Christian monotheism. Christian monotheism, more than simply expressing a belief in only one God or that Christians worship only one God, also expresses qualitative commitments. The one God exists as ontologically distinct from all other beings. While there are other heavenly beings, beings which we might label "gods", as in the biblical witness, there is only one "God". The biblical witness affirms God's "species-uniqueness" even as it affirms other creatures, both spiritual or heavenly and earthly or physical. As Michael Heiser points out, the biblical witness upholds God's species-uniqueness in at least five ways: 1) God's pre-existence to all other beings; 2) his creation of all other beings; 3) his power over all other beings; 4) the biblical insistence that God is incomparable, and (5) the obligation all other conscious beings have to worship Him (Heiser 2007:250–57).

As a summary of key aspects of the traditional Christian concept of God, we can make the following points. God, in traditional Christianity is:

1. Personal and incorporeal: God is self-conscious, loving, communicative, and wise, yet unlike humans, is not essentially "uniquely associated with one physical entity like a body" (Beckwith 1998:52), except in the Son's humbling himself to become incarnate as the man Jesus Christ.
2. The creator and sustainer of all that has come into being: God is the fundamental cause for all that has come into being, and all that continues to exist does so due to his sustaining power. God is said to create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

3. Omnipotent: God is all-powerful and thus can do anything that is logically possible and consistent with his perfection (Beckwith 1998:52).
4. Omniscient: God has a perfect knowledge of every past, present, and future item of knowledge.
5. Immutable: God is unchanging in his essential nature, attributes, and purposes.
6. Omnipresent: God is not bound by a physical body and so is able to be present in all places at all times.
7. Necessary: Unlike contingent things which depend on God to exist, God exists as he does as a necessary being. There is no possible world in which God does not exist, and God exists identically in all possible worlds. That is to say, God exists with *De Re* necessity (Parrish 1997:13).
8. Incomparable: There is no other being that rivals God's power, knowledge, goodness, glory, honour, etc.
9. Grounding for all moral laws: God's character is the grounding for what is actually good.
10. *A se*: God has forever existed and is alone self-existent.

5.3 Introduction to Mormon thought concerning deity

Defining the LDS doctrine of deity has been challenging to many who have undertaken such a task. One of the reasons for this is that the LDS Church believes that "God continues to speak through his anointed servants", and in so doing, "God continues to reveal, elucidate, and clarify what has already been given" (Millet 2007:277). Further, the LDS canon of scripture is "open, flexible, and expanding". Thus, there is a variety of streams of thought one should examine in building out the LDS concept of God. There are, of course, the standard works of Mormonism: The Bible (as far as it is translated [transmitted] correctly), The Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C), and the Pearl of Great Price. In learning what the LDS faith teaches on a particular doctrine, one should also examine official declarations or proclamations made by LDS church prophets and apostles, as well as things "taught or discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by

the general Church leaders" (pp. 266–267). Still further, one ought to consider what is taught in the handbooks or approved curriculum of the LDS Church today.

What follows below is an attempt to reconstruct the historical development of the LDS doctrine of deity from these sources, while looking to other relevant diaries, journals, letters, and treatises to help add context where necessary. Following this historical theological sketch, we will be prepared to offer a basic synthesis of the doctrine of God within mainstream LDS thought. Following that historical sketch, I will give voice to several other modern conceptions of God that have taken shape within LDS thought.

5.3.1 The religious environment of Joseph Smith prior to the "First Vision"

Joseph Smith Jr. was born to Lucy Mack Smith and Joseph Smith Sr. on December 23, 1805. His maternal grandfather, Solomon Mack, described life as made up of "toil, hurt, defeat, and death" (Bushman 2005:11). Solomon was born September 15, 1732 and lived through and enlisted in both the French and Indian War and the American Revolutionary War. For the better part of his life, he held no religious commitments and was "defeated in one venture after another" (p. 10). Solomon's wife, Lydia Gates Mack, had joined the Congregational church, and it was her influence that instilled virtues and piety in Lucy Mack Smith and her siblings (p. 13). Solomon did come to faith late in life. He claimed that his conversion, whereby "God did appear for me and took me out of the horrible pit and mirey clay, and set my feet on the rock of Christ Jesus," was the one real triumph of his life (p. 11).

Joseph Smith's paternal grandparents were Asael and Mary Smith. Asael's father Solomon Smith was an honoured and respected public servant who served in the Massachusetts legislature and in a variety of other esteemed positions. His obituary called him "a sincere friend to the liberties of his country, and a strenuous advocate for the doctrines of Christianity" (Bushman 2005:14). Though respected, Samuel was not wealthy, and Asael and his siblings had to work hard to make a way for themselves in the world. Asael married Mary Duty in 1767, and by 1791, the

two had eleven children and no home or property (pp. 14–15). Through Asael's hard work, and with the help of his seven sons, he was able to purchase several adjoining farms, which he gave to his sons as they were married.

Asael sought to instil in his family a bond of unity he felt he never had from his family growing up. He also sought to impart aspects of his faith to his family. Asael "had been dislodged from the crumbling orthodoxies of New England Congregationalism" in which he had been baptized as a child (Bushman 2005:17). He had been drawn to the preaching of John Murray, a universalist preacher who was known for his appeal to common people. Murray's preaching seemed to answer a need many of that age were sensing, a need to "make God more reasonable and benevolent than Calvinism allowed". This drive toward universalism was a major emphasis on American soil in the first half of the nineteenth century (Ahlstrom 1972:476), and Asael became moderator of a New England convention of Universalists, of which Joseph Smith Sr. was a part (Bushman 2005:17). At one point, when Joseph Smith Sr. began attending Methodist meetings with his wife, Asael approached his son and pressed him to stop: "Universalists thought evangelical belief slandered a loving heavenly father. If grace could save one, it could save all" (p. 25).

When Joseph Smith Sr. married Lucy Mack, in 1796, he received a farm which provided for the new family (Bushman 2005:15). He opened a store several miles away, and through that venture ended up losing the family farm. This sent him searching for new work. He worked as a teacher in the winter and helped work on farms in the summer. The Smith family moved from New England to Palmyra, NY, in 1816. That move, which seemed to offer the family some stability, ended up leaving the family landless again (Bushman 2008:9). Life was not easy for the Smith family, but they managed to stay afloat economically.

Lucy loved and admired her husband but was uneasy with his "diffidence about religion" (Bushman 2005:23). Joseph Smith Sr. "hovered on the margins of the churches", never willing to be fully invested in any of the churches organized in

the area. He was concerned with salvation but did not know where to turn (Bushman 2008:9). Though Lucy was very concerned with the subject of religion, her experiences with loss and hardship brought her into contact with insensitive ministers who were unable to help her feel connected to any church (Bushman 2005:25). This led her to turn inward, resigning herself to “Bible reading and self-instruction”, though she did join the Presbyterian church in Palmyra later in life (Bushman 2008:9). Joseph Smith Jr. and Sr. did not join Lucy in that endeavour.

The Smith family’s move to Palmyra in 1816 landed them in an era and area heavily influenced by the Second Great Awakening. So many revivals had swept through upstate New York where Joseph Smith grew up that the area has been called the “Burned-Over District” (Kidd 2019:86). In fact, the religion produced by Joseph Smith can be viewed as a “product of the ferment caused by the Second Great Awakening”.

The Enlightenment supplied to the populace a feeling that one should be free to follow one’s own religious pursuits rather than be forced to join a particular church. The Second Great Awakening tied conversion to religious experience and had unwittingly undermined the authority of the clergy. In addition, a spirit of disestablishment democracy swept many American Christians to see authority based in regular congregants rather than institutions or other hierarchical structures. Many of these features of the Second Great Awakening find their seeds in the religious awakening of the previous generation.

During the Great Awakening, conversion came to be less about doctrine and more concerned with heartfelt religious experience as individuals were pressed to look within to experience God’s work of grace in their lives. Experiences of God, rather than being a reality reserved for but a few, came to be expected, and many reported bodily evidence of such experiences (Ahlstrom 1972:287). The Second Great Awakening carried on the Romantic tradition of religious enthusiasm and elevated feelings as a guide to what is real. During this “age of the common man”, traditional church ways were directly challenged, and personal experiences

undermined doctrinal moorings for many (Ahlstrom 1972:475). This movement imparted a willingness to experiment with new structures. Charles Finney, whose preaching in upstate New York epitomized the religious fever of the later stages of the Second Great Awakening, implemented new measures to win souls. He held prolonged meetings, used an “anxious bench”, used colloquial language in the pulpit, prayed for sinners by name, and tolerated mixed male and female gatherings where women were allowed to speak. Numerous revivals and itinerant preachers swept through Joseph Smith’s area to “save souls”. There was also a divisiveness that adjoined this religious fervour as Calvinist and Arminian preachers each sought to bring people into their brand of Christianity.

Joseph Jr. joined a Methodist probationary class for a time after catching “a spark of Methodism in the camp meeting”, but for the most part, he was on his own to find his way spiritually (Bushman 2005:37). His family had no firm ties to any church, nor did he have any regular religious instruction besides Bible reading for educational and pietistic purposes. He claimed that he could “learn more in the woods from the Bible than from any meeting” (p. 46). This growing trend in early- to mid-nineteenth century American religion tended to reject cold formalism and hierarchies and increasingly came to see that the farmer has just as much, if not more, theological insight as a trained minister (Ahlstrom 1972:475). Joseph had been touched by various religious movements in the area in 1816 and 1817 and became increasingly concerned with spiritual matters. He turned to the Bible for answers, believing, as he was taught, that they contained the word of God (Bushman 2005:37). He claims to have lost trust in all the denominations in the area after seeing that their practitioners did “adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation”, but he had not given up on God.

Though not orthodox, Joseph’s upbringing was certainly not unspiritual. Joseph’s mother was a baptized Christian and eventually joined the Presbyterians in the area. Joseph’s father had a series of dreams that led him to believe the religious institutions surrounding him were of no value, though in one dream he found himself pleading the merits of Jesus and thought of that as a conversion

experience (Bushman 2005:37). Still though, Joseph Sr. remained outside the norm of orthodox Christianity (p. 26). He was involved in magical practices (Quinn 1998:31), though this was not uncommon at the time, and he often blended these practices with Christian faith as evidence of "general faith in invisible forces" (Bushman 2005:50). Joseph Jr. carried on the magic treasure-seeking practices of his father, attempting to find hidden treasures for profit, an endeavour Joseph was arrested for on one occasion (p. 49). Joseph Smith Sr. claimed to be mortified that so miraculous a power was used only in the service of earthly gain, and he began to pray that this power would be used to accomplish God's will (p. 52).

It would seem then that Joseph, before 1820, believed that God existed and that God had revealed himself to humankind in the Bible. He also believed that God could be sought in prayer and experienced by genuine seekers, and that a person did not need to be a part of any denomination to do so. It also appears that Smith was more akin to his Father's universalistic and Arminian brand of theology over his mother's Reformed leanings, though it is hard to know for sure his exact beliefs on the matter (Bushman 2005:37). He was at home in Christianity, though he could find no Christian expression that suited him.

5.3.2 The doctrine of God expressed by Joseph Smith from the "First Vision" to the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830

Joseph Smith's "First Vision" is considered by many to be the founding event of Mormonism (Bushman 2008:16). In a conference talk in October 2002, then Prophet and President Gordon B. Hinckley commented on Joseph's "First Vision". He said,

> Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens. (Hinckley 2002:80)

Smith claims that he had this visionary experience in 1820, though the details are a bit hard to piece together accurately. This trouble owes to the fact that

Joseph's first telling of the event took place a dozen years later and subsequent versions of the same event betray details which are difficult to harmonize.

In 1832, Smith recalled that his teenage mind was facing great unrest because he could not find the answers to two vexing questions: which church was true and how a person can find salvation. He claims to have been convicted of his sins and to have ascertained through the scriptures that the church had apostatized from the true faith. Joseph claims that at 16 years old, with this weighing on him mightily, he cried out to the Lord, and claims to have seen a pillar of light which rested upon him. Along with this sight, Joseph claims he was filled with the spirit of God, and the heavens were opened. He further claimed that the Lord spoke to him, forgiving his sins, commanding him to keep his commandments, and condemning people of Joseph's day for their sinful ways.

Several years later, in 1835, Joseph reported the vision a second time and added additional details. In his 1835 account, Joseph recalled being confused regarding the different systems of religion being taught, and, wanting to know which was the right path, he retired to a grove and prayed. He reported that he was about 14 years old at this juncture. Having withdrawn to the woods, he recalled two scriptures coming to mind: Luke 11:9 and James 1:5. As Joseph attempted to pray, he claims to have heard the noise of walking near him, which made it difficult to pray, but finally, after several attempts at prayer, he claims a pillar of fire rested on him and a personage appeared in the midst of the flame. Later, he reported another personage appeared. Though Joseph did not specify who he thought these persons were, he claimed one of the personages told Joseph that his sins were forgiven and testified that Jesus Christ is the son of God. In this telling of the vision, Smith reported seeing many angels as well.

In 1838, Joseph again retold that First Vision experience. This time he reported that while in his fifteenth year, he was perplexed by each of the denominations claiming that the other groups were wrong. Joseph remembers that one day he read James 1:5 that "if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that

giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (KJV). With this verse in mind, he headed out into the woods to pray. There he reports that he was first met by thick darkness, then a pillar of light fell upon him and he saw two personages. One of them pointed to the other and said, "This is my beloved Son, hear him" (Smith 1980:1:5). After composing himself, Joseph asked the personages which of all the sects he should join. Joseph claimed the audible voice told him to join none of the sects and that "all their creeds were an abomination in his sight, that their professors were all corrupt". In this account, Joseph does not mention the promise of forgiveness that had been so prominent in the first two retellings, and the apostasy of Christian churches stands as the central message of the vision (Bushman 2005:40).

If Joseph's accounts can be thought to accurately reflect his theological outlook around 1820, then it would seem that he believed in God, that Jesus was the Son of God, and also that there was something wrong with the creeds of Christianity as they were believed and practiced in his time. Smith seemed to have a distaste for the Calvinist and Arminian debate, the mainstream doctrine of the Trinity, and the lax morals of many Christians of his day.

Further, there seems to be a noticeable shift in Joseph's thinking between the 1832 and 1835 version of the "First Vision". His 1832 telling of the vision is in harmony with the modalistic concept of God found in the 1830 edition of The Book of Mormon, as will be described in the next section. The 1832 "First Vision" sees only one personage.

In later times, especially after the Kirtland school of the Prophets produced the *Lectures on Faith* in the winter of 1834–1835, Smith's view of God seems to change. He speaks of God not in modalistic terms, but, as we'll see, in a manner that sharply divides the Father and the Son. This shift appears to manifest itself in the 1835 version of the "First Vision", where Smith now speaks of seeing two personages simultaneously. While not identified as such in 1835, it seems to me that Joseph believed these two beings were divine beings. Two facts point me in

this direction. First, he has already identified the heavenly apparition as the Lord in his 1832 account. Second, he claims that this person speaks out of a fire that was spread all around and yet consumed nothing. This is a clear allusion to the Lord's speaking out of the burning bush to Moses. Further, these two personages are identified in the 1838 version of the "First Vision" as the Father and the Son.

Intriguingly, Joseph states that the Bible is what guided him to seek answers from God, while at the same time, the "First Vision" undermines a commonly held belief in the day that the Bible could be plainly understood. If the Bible's meaning was immediate and obvious, then Joseph could have sought to ascertain which of the sects of his day was correct by evaluating them by the biblical deposit. Joseph bypasses the authority of the Bible and gets around its supposed plainness to talk to God directly (Willsky 2014:15). In so doing, Joseph begins a journey that will shape a movement that is less Bible-dependent and more driven by God's direct authority as purportedly revealed to its members through Joseph.

5.3.3 The doctrine of God as reflected in the Book of Mormon and other revelations prior to the organization of the church Joseph established

In the years following that First Vision, Joseph Smith claims that an angel named Moroni led Joseph to a hill near the Smith family farm, where Smith uncovered a stone box containing gold plates upon which were recorded an ancient history in a lost language. Joseph claimed to have been given the gift and power of God to translate the gold plates. With financial and scribal help, Joseph was able to publish the translation of the gold plates as *The Book of Mormon* (BOM) in 1830.

The BOM is comprised of fifteen books named after supposed prophets who once lived in the Americas. The BOM tells the story of a migration of Jews from Jerusalem to the Americas around 600 BC, the split of these people into two warring communities, the Nephites and the Lamanites, and Christ's visitation to these people after his crucifixion in Jerusalem.

Jesus, in the BOM, was able to bring peace and prosperity for a time, but eventually that golden age deteriorated, and new wars broke out, which doomed the Nephite people. Mormon, one of last of the Nephites, compiled the works of the prophets onto gold plates and gave the record to his son Moroni, who, sometime around AD 421, buried them in the hillside, where Joseph eventually recovered them (Bushman 2008:23).

Mosiah 13-15 contain interesting passages relating to God. Mosiah 13:34 says,

> Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth?[19]

Later, in Mosiah 15:1-5, the prophet Abinadi said,

> I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because he was of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and the Son—And they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. And thus all flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God…

These passages from the book of Mosiah appear to equate the Father and the Son, seeing them in modalistic terms. There is one being, God, who will come down to redeem his people. The Father wills the redemption of his people and is born in flesh, thus subjecting flesh to the Father's will. In virtue of his taking on of flesh, this person is called the Son. This passage affirms that the one person who is God is both the Father and the Son. This same idea appears in several places in the 1830 edition of 1 Nephi as well. In the 1830 edition of 1 Nephi 11:16–21 and 32, an angel say to Nephi,

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[19] Unless otherwise specified, all BOM references will be from the 1981 edition.

> Knowest thou the condescention [sic] of God? And I said unto him, I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things. And he said unto me, Behold, the virgin which thou seest, is the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh. And it came to pass that I beheld that she was carried away in the spirit; and that she had been carried away in the spirit for the space of a time, the angel spake unto me, saying, look! And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a chid [sic] in her arms. And the angel said unto me, behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father…. And the angel said unto me again, Look and behold the condescention [sic] of God! And I looked and beheld the Redeemer of the world…

A few verses later, in the 1830 edition of 1 Nephi 13:40, an angel tells Nephi,

> These last records which thou has seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which is of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Saviour of the world…

These verses from 1 Nephi seem to indicate a belief that God the Father is also Jesus the Son. The angel tells Nephi to gaze at the condescension of God, and Nephi looks and sees Jesus, whom the angel calls “the Eternal Father”. Far from being a peripheral teaching, the angel predicts that this truth will be lost and that one of the primary marks of the restoration to come will be a restoration of the teaching that Jesus (the Lamb of God) is the Eternal Father. At this early stage, Mormon documents clearly express that it was the modalistic interpretation of the divine that had been lost by the Christian Church over the centuries (Widmer 2000:53).

A modalistic interpretation of the Father and the Son is affirmed again in 2 Nephi 11:7 when Jacob confessed, “But there is a God, and he is Christ”. Later, in 2 Nephi 26:12 we read,

> And as I spake concerning the convincing of the Jews, that Jesus is the very Christ, it must needs be that the Gentiles be convinced also that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.

In these passages from 2 Nephi, the concern that Gentiles have lost the modalistic understanding of Jesus as the same being as the Eternal God is reinforced.

In 3 Nephi 11:14, Jesus declares, “I am the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth”. Then in 3 Nephi 11:27, Jesus teaches Nephi a baptismal formula:

> I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost … And after this manner shall ye baptize in my name; for behold, verily I say unto you, that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost are one: and I am in the Father, and the Father in me, and the Father and I are one.

Mormon 7:7 calls the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost “one God”. Later, in Mormon 9:37, Mormon recalls the covenant that God the Father made with the house of Israel (cf. 3 Nephi 20:12). In 3 Nephi 15:5, Jesus reveals that it was he who covenanted with the people of Israel.

In Ether 3:9, the Lord told Jared’s brother, “I shall take upon me flesh and blood”. Then the Lord showed himself to Jared saying,

> Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name…

This passage is significant because the Book of Ether is said to preserve a record of Jared, who was present at the building of the Tower of Babel and who was led by God from that place to the Americas. God, speaking to a man thousands of years before the incarnation, and in fact, many years before Israel is formed, reveals himself to Jared. God allegedly reveals to him that before his incarnation, he was known as the Father, but that in his incarnation he will be known as the Son. The person speaking to Jared reveals that he is both the Father and the Son.

Alma 11 provides an interesting exchange between Zeezrom and the prophet Amulek. Zeezrom asks Amulek if he teaches that there is a true and living God, to which Amulek replies, “Yea, there is a true and living God” (Alma 11:27). Zeezrom follows up by asking, “Is there more than one God” (Alma 11:28)? To which Amulek quips, “No” (Alma 11:29). After a brief exchange, Zeezrom asks, “Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father?” (Alma 11:38). Amulek replies, “Yea, he is the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning

and the end, the first and the last" (Alma 11:39). Amulek then declares that at judgment, each person will be "arraigned before the bar of Christ the Son, and God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, which is one Eternal God, to be judged according to their works" (Alma 11:44).

This exchange seems to show that Joseph has moved in a different direction than traditional orthodox trinitarian understandings of the relation between the Father, Son, and Spirit. The New Testament affirms that the Father and the Son are "one" (Jn. 10:30). Traditional interpretations of that oneness are bound up in the metaphysics of Christ's being consubstantial with the Father. That is, Jesus and the Father, though distinct persons, are of one essence. Joseph's conception, reflected in the passage above, seems to move in a different direction. The oneness of Jesus and the Father appears to be one of identity. The Son (Jesus) just is the Father. Joseph appears to remove the distinction between the Father and the Son. Rather than agreeing with orthodox Christian belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one God in three persons, Joseph seems to affirm that the Father, Son, and Spirit are more akin to one God who wears different masks.

In April of 1830, Joseph Smith claimed to have received a revelation relating to the organization of the "Church of Christ in these last days". This revelation, now known as D&C 20, declared by revelation that:

> There is a God in heaven who is infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them. (D&C 20:17)

This God is called "the only true God", and Joseph claims that God said that he should be the only being whom his followers should worship (D&C 20:19). D&C 20:21 bears witness to Jesus being the "Only Begotten Son", and D&C 20:26 points to the ministry of the Holy Ghost who testifies of Jesus. These three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are said to be "one God, infinite and eternal without end" (D&C 20:28). At this stage, Joseph appears to be holding on to monotheism. He

believes in the existence and worship of one God only, and yet he seemingly struggles to articulate the relation between the Father, Son, and Spirit who are each God. God is Father in his eternal pre-incarnation mode, he is Spirit as he speaks to his people and empowers them (D&C 20:35), and he is the Son in the incarnation. This passage appears to support the notion that Joseph held to there being one God who expresses himself in a modalistic fashion (Widmer 2000:36).

While this view is able to make sense of many passages in the Book of Mormon, there are several places where this view does not seem like the best fit. In 3 Nephi 11:32, Jesus says his doctrine was given to him by the Father. Later, in 3 Nephi 15:19, Jesus is commanded by the Father (e.g., 3 Nephi 26:2). Again, in 3 Nephi 18:27, Jesus anticipates going “unto my Father” (cf. 3 Nephi 26:15). While passages like these do not fit neatly into the modalistic theory of Joseph’s conception of God around the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon, I find it easier to see how these verses could fit into that modalistic theory than it is to interpret the other passages above in a non-modalistic fashion. Jesus, in the 3 Nephi passages, could be thought to be speaking anthropomorphically regarding his transition from Eternal Father to Son of God. Ronald Huggins has pointed out that the language of the Book of Mormon “has been carefully crafted to avoid the impression that the Father and the Son anyway are appearing simultaneously” (Huggins 2006a). One example of this is found in 3 Nephi 11:7-8, wherein the Father announces Jesus’ arrival after his resurrection. The voice of the Father is heard, and only after the voice has spoken is Jesus seen descending out of Heaven. The Father and the Son need not be seen as separate persons. Passages from the BOM lead us to believe that there is an Eternal Father and an incarnate Son, but it does not require belief that these are separate persons. This has led most historical theologians to hold that “the early works of Joseph Smith show a clear monotheistic leaning” (Harrell 2011:118). This monotheism seems best described as modalistic.

5.3.4 The doctrine of God as it develops after the organization of the church Joseph founded and through the Kirtland years

Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830, and shortly thereafter, on April 6, 1830, what would become the LDS Church was organized (D&C 21). Three significant works and a variety of shorter revelations were written by Joseph in the period following the organization of the church prior to his relocation to Nauvoo, Illinois in 1839.

In June of 1830, Joseph penned what he claimed was a revelation of a vision originally given to Moses prior to the writing of Genesis. This revelatory outpouring evolved into a retranslation of the Bible. Joseph claims to have finished the translation of the New Testament and to have completed a review of that document on February 2, 1833 (Joseph Smith 1980:1:322–24). Later that year, in a letter dated July 2, 1833, Smith claims to have just finished the translation of the Bible as a whole (Joseph Smith 1980:1:369). The *Lectures on Faith* were delivered in the winter between 1834 and 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio, and represent the third major work of this period.

In the Book of Moses, the Lord God appears to Moses in glory and tells him of his Son, his “Only Begotten”, who will be “the Savior” (Moses 1:6). The Book of Moses, known more for its revelation that God has created “worlds without number” (Moses 1:33), and that God’s work and glory is bringing to pass the “immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), also introduces a sharper separation between the Father and the Son than Joseph had taught previously. The early chapters of this work, written between June and October of 1830, teach that Jesus, the Only Begotten Son (Moses 6:52), was present with God at creation (Moses 1:32, 2:1). After creating Adam, God speaks to the Son, telling him, “[I]t was not good that the man should be alone” (Moses 3:18). God also speaks to the Only Begotten after Adam and Eve transgressed and ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, saying, “And I, the Lord God, said unto mine Only begotten, Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil” (Moses 4:28).

In another portion written between June and October of 1830, a conversation between God and Satan is recapitulated wherein Satan, who was with God "from the beginning" (Moses 4:1), pleads with God to allow him to be the redeemer. God does not give that role to Satan and tells Moses that that honour was instead given to his Only Begotten who was "chosen from the beginning" (Moses 4:2–3).

Later in the work, in a portion published in December of 1830, God, who calls himself the "Man of Council" and "Endless and Eternal", looks ahead to the time when his "Chosen" suffers for sins and shall "return unto me" (Moses 7:39). Moses 7:59 continues the trend of seeing a sharp distinction between the person of the Father and the Son. There, Enoch reports seeing the Son "ascend up unto the Father".

The Book of Moses represents a shift in Joseph's thinking about God. No longer equating the Son and the Father, he begins to depict them in sharp distinction. This distinction is further elucidated in the *Lectures on Faith*.

During the winter of 1834 and 1835 Joseph, Smith taught a series of lectures to a class of elders in Kirtland. The *Lectures on Faith* differentiate between the Father and Son more sharply than did the Book of Mormon (Alexander 1980:25). In verse two of "Lecture Second," Joseph observes that

> God is the only supreme governor, and independent being, in whom all the fullness and perfection dwells; who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient; without beginning of days or end of life (Smith 1985:10).

Verses 13 and 21 of "Lecture Third" teach that God was "God before the world was created, and the same God that he was, after it was created" (Smith 1985:41). Verse 21 of the same lecture expands on this thinking by claiming God "changes not", that "he is the same yesterday, to-day and forever", and that "his course is one eternal round" (p. 42).

"Lecture Fifth" verse two proposes that

> There are two personages who constitute the great, matchless, governing and supreme power over all things…They are the Father and the Son: The Father being a personage of spirit, glory and power: possessing all perfection and fullness, the Son, who was in the bosom of the Father, a personage of tabernacle…possessing all the fullness of the Father…called the Son because of the flesh…possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit (Smith 1985:59–60).

In these passages, we find a clear distinction between two personages: one personage of spirit, the other of flesh. These two personages comprise what is called the "godhead". This same passage reports that the Son is in possession of the fulness of the Father in virtue of his overcoming, that is, "he kept the law of God, and remained without sin" (Smith 1985:59). "Having overcome", he "received a fullness of the glory of the Father – possessing the same mind with the Father, which mind is the Holy Spirit" (p. 59). Remarkably, this lecture also teaches that the Holy Spirit is "shed forth upon all who believe on his name and keep his commandments". Those who keep the commandments are thought to "grow up from grace to grace" until they are "filled with the fullness of his glory, and become one in him, even as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one".

Section three of this lecture states that in heaven, redeemed individuals have a reward. He teaches that,

> …the saints have a sure foundation laid for the exercise of faith unto life and salvation…even that of partaking of the fullness of the Father and the Son, through the Spirit. As the Son partakes of the fullness of the Father through the Spirit, so the saints are, by the same Spirit, to be partakers of the same fullness, to enjoy the same glory; for as the Father and the Son are one, so in like manner the saints are to be one in them. (Smith 1985:61)

In the above passages, Joseph teaches that the Father and the Son are distinct, and together with the shared mind of the Holy Spirit, they make up the Godhead. The same fulness of glory and filling of the Spirit that Jesus enjoys are the reward for the faithful and obedient saints in the life to come. While the Son shares the mind of God and partakes of his glory and fulness enough to be part of the godhead, he still seems to see the Father as a unique and independent being. The Son, a member of the godhead, depends on God's glory and fulness for his

exaltation. This same exaltation to glory and fulness appears to be available to saints who keep the commandments.

Stemming from his work on the book of Moses, Joseph began a revision of the Bible in June of 1830 (Matthews 1972), a project he worked on for several years, apparently concluding the work in 1833. His journal entry for July 2, 1833 states, “We this day finished the translating of the Scriptures, for which we returned gratitude to our Heavenly Father” (Smith 1980:1:368–369). Of interest to me is that while making numerous changes to biblical texts, one may note his work to remove “all references to a plurality of Gods from Old Testament passages” (Widmer 2000:48). Beginning with Genesis and the creation account, Smith removed ambiguous passages and replaced them with what he thought the original authors intended (p. 50). Passages such as Exodus 7:1, 22:28, 1 Samuel 28:13, and Revelation 1:6, which could be read in a way so as to infer a plurality of Gods, were changed by Joseph Smith to exclude that possibility. Joseph removed any hint of plurality of gods from the Bible while, during this same period, authorizing changes to the Book of Mormon to remove several of the overt modalistic passages noted in the last section. In 1837, passages such as 1 Nephi 11:18, 21, 32, and 13:40 were altered so that Jesus would not be referred to as the Eternal Father. Rather, Joseph changed the text to identify Jesus as a separate person, namely, the “Son of the Eternal Father”.

Beyond the three major works of this period already examined, it is worth noting several other revelations that Joseph produced during this time. In December of 1830 (D&C 35:2), Jesus introduces himself as the Son of God, crucified for the sins of the world so that as many as believe on his name may “become the sons of God, even one in me as I am one in the Father, as the Father is one in me, that we may be one”. It seems impossible at this point for the Son to be thought of as identical to the Father, as Joseph certainly does not believe that humans will become identical to Jesus. Rather, it is likely that Joseph has adopted a view of Jesus and the Father’s oneness that does not consist of their being identical.

Not long after that revelation, on January 2, 1831, Jesus, who is described as the “Lord your God” (D&C 38:1), pleads before the Father for those who have believed in his name (D&C 38:4). This is similar to a revelation given September 26, 1830, in which Jesus claimed to be the church’s “advocate with the Father” (D&C 29:5). These passages demonstrate a growing trend to see a sharp distinction between the Son and the Father. While the Book of Mormon and revelations given up to that point seem best understood in a modalistic light, Joseph’s teaching and revelatory work all seem to point in a new direction. This direction views the Father and the Son as separate persons, with the Son having received a fullness of divinity in virtue of his keeping the commandments of God and so sharing the mind of God. At this stage of thought, God is not thought of as having a body but is an eternal personage of spirit.

Even while expunging any hint of a plurality of Gods from the Bible, I also detect an incipient form of plurality slipping into Joseph’s thought. The *Lectures on Faith* spoke of humans being rewarded with a fulness of God’s glory, just as Jesus has been so glorified. LDS theologian Robert Millet believes that D&C 76, recorded on February 16, 1832, also points to deification of humans (Millet 2012:262). Just as Jesus is said to have overcome by keeping the commandments, so D&C 76:52-53 highlights the members of the church of the firstborn who have been washed and cleansed of their sins by “keeping the commands” and so have overcome by faith. These members of the church of the first born receive God’s “fulness, and of his glory” (D&C 76:56). These glorified individuals are said to be “equal in power, and in might, and in dominion” with God the Father (D&C 76:95). It would seem that Joseph believed God to be full of glory, but eager to share that glory with others who, like Jesus, overcome the world by obeying God’s commands.

In May of 1833, Joseph recorded a revelation he claimed to have received from Jesus. In the revelation, Jesus highlights the close relationship he has with the Father. He says that he is one with the Father in the sense that the Father “gave me of his fulness” (D&C 93:4). Jesus affirms that he did not have this fullness to start, but continued from “grace to grace” until he received the fulness (D&C 93:12–14). In

this revelation, Jesus directs humans to receive from God “grace for grace” until they also “receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19–20). Finally, Jesus reveals that that he was “in the beginning with the Father” and was the “Firstborn”. Even more surprising, Jesus reveals, “Ye were also in the beginning with the Father” (D&C 93:21–23). Here Jesus reveals that humanity’s past was similar to his and points them to a future like his as well. To the extent that one can say that Jesus is divinized, Jesus allegedly opens the door to others to be so deified.

Widmer is incredulous that Joseph would allow for deification of humans at this point in his conception of God since, as noted above, Joseph’s other work as seer and revelator at the time consistently safeguards against the existence of a plurality of gods. I believe part of Widmer’s misguided incredulity regarding deification in this period is due to his belief that Smith had arrived at a version of binitarianism (Widmer 2000:59). If Joseph had taught that there were two persons who were both equally and independently God, or that God had always existed as two glorified persons, then I think Widmer would have a point, since Joseph does seem to think humans who live God’s commands can one day come to share in God’s glory and fulness just as Jesus has. However, it seems to me that Joseph is still holding on to a monotheistic ideal wherein there exists one independent God who can glorify others and fill them with his fulness under the right conditions. Jesus has met those conditions, and other humans may as well. What remains unclear at this point is what, if anything, remains ontologically different between the Father and those he glorifies.

While Widmer does not see the incipit deification because he sees binitarianism, Huggins rejects binitarianism but remains unconvinced that the post-1830 teaching of Joseph Smith Jr. holds a sharper distinction between the Father and the Son (Huggins 2006a). Rather than seeing a separation and the beginnings of Joseph’s teaching on deification, Huggins sees Joseph teaching in continuity with an expansionistic modalism akin to the teaching of Emmanuel Swedenborg, in which Jesus, in the incarnation, inhabited both heaven (as the Father) with his spiritual body and earth (as the Son) with his body of flesh. He argues, “in the Book

of Mormon the incarnation really amounts to the addition of a human body to the one person of God, who is also the same divine person as the Father" (Huggins 2006a). This, for Huggins, has the end result that "when the Son ascended into heaven there would henceforth be two personages there". I agree with Huggins in his rejection of the idea that Smith had transitioned to a form of binitarianism in this era, but I do not find Huggins' expansionistic modalism in operation. Not only does D&C 93:21 point to Jesus being with the Father "in the beginning", but the *Lectures on Faith* also highlight the mechanism at play in Jesus' deification. He had kept the law and had remained without sin. So also, as humans follow Jesus' example and keep his commands, they too can receive of the fulness of God (D&C 76:56, 93:20).

In conclusion, Joseph does not depict the Father and the Son as defined by their modes of operation in this era (Widmer 2000:59); rather, we see a distinction that allows for a relationship of obedience and cooperation in carrying out God's plans. In this period, we also see the beginnings of Joseph's teaching on deification. Though not its full form, which will also include teaching regarding God the Father's own path to deification, the Father is said to give a fullness of his glory to Jesus because he has kept the law. Joseph's teaching in this era also begins to suggest a potential that humans will be far more exalted than orthodox Christian belief would allow. Even in this stage, Joseph seems to be saying that humans have the potential to be as divine as Jesus.

5.3.5 The doctrine of God as it develops during the Far West (1838) and early Nauvoo period to 1843

One can discern several new emphases in Joseph's teaching and revelations in the post-Kirtland era. In his teaching during this era, one can see Joseph stress the expanded past of the human soul. Alongside this expanded view of the human soul, we see an expanding world of deity. In this period, Joseph also begins to teach the plurality of Gods.

Willard Richards, who became an apostle and was the appointed LDS Church historian of his time, records an 1839 public discourse of Joseph Smith wherein Joseph teaches, “The Spirit of Man is not a created being; it existed from Eternity & will exist to eternity” (Ehat and Cook 1980:9).

William Clayton recorded a sermon given by Joseph Smith on January 5, 1841 at the organization of a school. Joseph preached,

> The elements are eternal. That which has a beginning will surely have an end … if the soul of man had a beginning it will surely have an end … That which is without body or parts is nothing. There is no other God in heaven but that God who has flesh and bones. (Ehat and Cook 1980:60)

Later in the address, Smith returned to this topic again, teaching,

> At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and we sanctioned it. We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom.

Also in 1841, William Patterson McIntire took notes on a sermon in which Joseph Smith taught that “the spirit or the intelligence of men are self Existant principles before the foundation this Earth” (Ehat and Cook 1980:68).[20]

William Clayton’s January 5, 1841 record also noted that Joseph taught from John 5:26: “As the father hath life in himself, even so hath he given the son to have life in himself”. From this verse, Joseph revealed, “God the father took life unto himself precisely as Jesus did” (Ehat and Cook 1980:60).

There are several remarkable points to draw from these sermons. First, Joseph teaches God is not a personage of Spirit, but a person of flesh like Jesus. Second, humans, like Jesus, were with God in eternity past and, in fact, have no beginning. Lastly, this appears to be the first time Joseph taught that God the

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[20] In this section the reader may note many formatting, spelling, and grammar errors in the journal and diary entries supplied from LDS members of the past. I have attempted to reproduce the text of the journal or diary entry as it appears in Ehat and Cook’s The *words of Joseph Smith*, and will not be marking each grammatical error.

Father once had a mortal probation and was resurrected with a body of flesh and bones (Ehat and Cook 1980:83). The idea may not have been original at this moment; however, Lorenzo Snow claimed to have received special revelation by inspiration in 1839: “As man now is, our God once was; As God now is, so we may be, and thus unfolds our destiny” (p. 84).

There exists a wide divide between Joseph’s teaching in this post-Kirtland period and his teaching that took place previously. He had already moved past his initial modalistic understandings of God and had begun thinking about heavenly glory in terms of sharing in God’s glory as Jesus does. We see something very different now taking shape here in the post-Kirtland Nauvoo era. Joseph has begun to suggest that Jesus’ rise to glory, more than being an example for us to follow, mirrors God’s own journey to glory.

Back in Kirtland, in the summer of 1835, Michael Chandler brought four mummies and several papyrus scrolls to the church headquarters. A group of Mormons purchased these artefacts after Joseph examined them and told them they contained the writings of Abraham. Joseph began producing the Book of Abraham (BAbr) from this material, finishing the first chapter, half of the book, and a grammar guide for the work while still in Kirtland. However, it was not until Joseph moved to Nauvoo that the bulk of the work was completed. Kurt Widmer has noted that the first three chapters of BAbr consistently refer to God in singular form, but beginning in the fourth chapter, a shift occurs and “Gods” is used throughout the remainder of the work (Widmer 2000:74). The early parts of the book, completed while still in Kirtland, are silent on the notion of the plurality of Gods, while the later chapters, which were not published until 1842, contain Joseph’s maturing thinking on God and the plurality of Gods.

In chapter three of BAbr*,* God tells Abraham that one can see relations like “larger than” in differing objects, and so, when comparing all objects, one can find the one that is the largest. In the same way, God says all intelligences are eternal and have “no beginning” and “they shall have no end” (BAbr 3:18). Still, the

passage argues that one can see that an intelligence can be “more intelligent” than another and that God is “more intelligent than they all” (3:19). In this way, Joseph describes humans as co-eternal with the Father, but lesser in quality in relation to him.

Chapter 3 also pictures God standing in the midst of many great and noble souls who he makes to be “rulers” (BAbr 3:23). In this “first estate”, Jesus, who is described as “one among them that was like unto God”, presses these to go with him to “make an earth whereon these (other spirits) may dwell” (the second estate) and prove their commitment to “do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them” and so “have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (3:23-26). This group of great and noble souls, led by Jesus, are described in chapter four as the “Gods” who organize and form the heavens and the earth. The Gods create the earth and all plant and animal life, forming “man from the dust of the ground” and breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils, thus making living souls (5:7).

Like in Joseph Smith’s preaching from this era, the Book of Abraham marks a development of Joseph’s doctrine of God as compared to his Kirtland days. Joseph has now become comfortable speaking of “Gods,” though he does not think of these as rivals to the Lord. They are part of a heavenly council of sorts, and they carry out God’s plans for the salvation of spirits (BAbr 3:27). The full extension of this developing thought would come in 1844 in two sermons that have shaped LDS theology from that time on.

5.3.6 The doctrine of God expressed in 1844

In this section, I will first examine several teachings that deal with the nature of God prior to the King Follett discourse. Next, I will examine the textual situation for the King Follett discourse. Thirdly, I will turn to opposition that stemmed from the discourse and Joseph’s response by way of the “Sermon in the Grove”. Finally, concluding remarks will be made.

5.3.7 Joseph's teaching on God in 1844 prior to the King Follett discourse

Early in 1844, Joseph preached often on the topic of what is required of the people to be "exalted". Wilford Woodruff's journal records a discourse delivered by Joseph on January 21, 1844, in which he lamented that the temple in Nauvoo was not complete yet (it was completed in May of 1846) because "the fullness of Salvation" cannot be had "without going through with all these ordinances" (Ehat and Cook 1980:319). The ordinances he is referencing were mentioned earlier in the sermon: "Baptisms, Confirmations, washings anointings ordinations & sealing powers" both for themselves and for their "Progenitors who are dead" so that they might "be exalted to thrones of glory with us" (p. 318-19). In this same sermon Joseph chastised the Mormon crowd for not abiding the "Celestial law and the whole law too". He saw too many people "fly to peaces [sic] like glass as soon as any thing Comes that is Contrary to their traditions". He reasoned, if "they Cannot stand the fire at all, How many will be able to abide a Celestial law & go through & receive their exaltation?".

Thomas Bullock's diary notes that in an address on the temple grounds on February 21st of 1844, Joseph spoke again regarding salvation. He said that "to get salvation we must not only do somethings but every thing which God had commanded to get salvation" (Ehat and Cook 1980:321).

Speaking to a large assembly on the temple lot on Sunday March 10th of 1844, Joseph preached about the "spirit of Elijah". Wilford Woodruff recorded Joseph's thoughts. He passed on that Joseph taught that this spirit of Elijah, which Joseph used to identify as the powers and endowments of the Melchizedek Priesthood, contained the power to "seal the children to the fathers & fathers to the Children" (Ehat and Cook 1980:329). This power, Joseph taught, gives one power to seal one's sons and daughters or fathers to one's self. This sealing was said to bind a person in heaven to those to whom they had been sealed.

James Burgess was also present for this March 10th sermon and recorded notes in his notebook.[1] He recalled Joseph also stressing that the congregation must first make their own "calling and election sure, going on from grace to grace until you obtain a promise from God for yourselves that you shall have eternal life" (p. 334). After receiving such assurance, Joseph taught they should "obtain a promise for our posterity". This sermon is another witness to Joseph's fervency in preaching about eternal life and the powers with which humans had been endowed by God.

On April 6, 1844, an "immense number of elders, and an innumerable concourse of people" (Ehat and Cook 1980:338) gathered for the church's annual conference. The conference minutes from the event say that Joseph addressed the crowd and informed them that he intended to "give [them] some instruction on the principals of eternal truth," but that he would "defer it until others had spoken" (p. 339). Wilford Woodruff's journal also notes that Joseph said that "[h]e was not a fallen prophet, & never in any nearer relationship with God than at the present time, & would show before the Conferen[ce] closed that God was with him" (p. 340).

On the next day, the LDS Church gathered at the temple to hear from their prophet. The crowd Joseph Smith faced was the largest audience to which he had ever spoken (Van Hale 1983:5). His sermon, named in honour of a recently deceased member of the church, "The King Follett discourse," generated a variety of responses. Wilfred Woodruff hailed the sermon as one of the instances in his life where he felt the Spirit of God most powerfully (p. 5). On the other hand, William Law, an apostle in the LDS Church and one of Joseph's councillors, felt the sermon was proof positive that Joseph was a fallen prophet (Widmer 2000:121). Law, reflecting on the sermon, called it "some of the most blasphemous doctrines … ever

[1] Burgess notes that when questioned following the sermon, Joseph gave revelation that "if you live until you are 85 years of age you shall see the face of the Son of Man" but that as long as you see the "rainbow strethching [sic] across the heavens there will be seed time and harvest and the son of Man will not come that year". Burgess notebook then includes a note to the effect of: Joseph Smith was born in the year 1805 + 85 = 1890.

heard of" (Bushman 2005:537). The divisive issue was Joseph's clear teaching on the nature of God.

5.3.8 Textual situation of the King Follett discourse

Van Hale describes the textual history of the King Follett discourse. He reports that there were four independent written recordings of the sermon (Van Hale 1983:5)—two by men who had been assigned as clerks for the conference (Thomas Bullock and William Clayton) and two by LDS Apostles (Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff). The first publication of the sermon came in the August 15th *Times and Seasons* in 1844. This text was essentially "minutes" of the conference prepared by Thomas Bullock, who had compared his notes with those of William Clayton and had, with the approval of the twelve apostles, made an amalgamated text which was more complete than either of the other reports separately (p. 6).

In 1855, the text was prepared by the LDS Church Historian's office for publication in the *History of the Church*. This new text added details from Woodruff's and Richards's records which helped to "fill out phrases and ideas already in the first version" (p. 6). This text was approved by LDS Church leaders, including then-prophet Brigham Young, and has been "the basic source for all subsequent printings of the discourse by the LDS Church". This text, as published by the LDS Church in *History of the Church* (vol. 6, chapter 14), serves as my source text for the King Follett discourse.

5.3.9 The Nature of God in the King Follett discourse

Joseph's King Follett discourse quickly turned to the nature of God. Joseph had been under tremendous pressure and had several dissenting pressures (Bushman 2005:537). Some have felt that Smith's discourse introduced new thought to maintain his primacy as the Prophet of God. Early in the sermon Smith reasoned,

> If I am so fortunate as to be the man to comprehend God, and explain or convey the principles to your hearts, so that the Spirit seals them upon you, then let every man and woman henceforth sit in silence, put their hands on their mouths, and never lift their hands or voices, or say anything against the man of God or the servants of God again ... and if I am bringing you to a knowledge of Him, all persecutions against me ought to cease. You will then know that I am His servant; for I speak as one having authority. (Smith 1980:304)

Perhaps Joseph thought teaching on such a core doctrine would "legitimate his claim to be a Prophet of God" (Widmer 2000:119).

Early in the discourse, Joseph stated, "It is necessary for us to have an understanding of God himself in the beginning…There are very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God" (Smith 1980:303). Then Joseph asked the congregation to "question in their own hearts, what kind of a being God is". Soon after, he claimed, "I will prove that the world is wrong, by showing what God is … I will go back to the beginning before the world was, to show what kind of being God is" (p. 305). Joseph claimed that "ninety-nine out of every hundred professing religious ministers are false teachers" (p. 304) and right away began to highlight what made his concept of God distinct, revealing:

> God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! That is the great secret. If the veil were rent today, and the great God who holds this world in its orbit, and who upholds all worlds and all things by His power, was to make himself visible,—I say, if you were to see him today, you would see him like a man in form—like yourselves in all the person, image, and very form as a man; for Adam was created in the very fashion, image and likeness of God, and received instruction from, and walked, talked and conversed with Him, as one man talks and communes with another. (Smith 1980:305)

This paragraph holds within it ideas that certainly set this teaching apart from anything in the orthodox Christian tradition, but equally, it is distinct from anything Joseph had taught previously. While Joseph had spoken of God's being embodied before, here he spoke of God's having a history. *God was once as we are now*! He expands on this idea in what follows immediately in his address.

We do well to remember this sermon is given in the honour of a prominent LDS member, King Follett, who had just passed away. Joseph intends these words to be of consolation when one considers the human condition. He says,

> In order to understand the subject of the dead, for consolation of those who mourn for the loss of their friends, it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. (Smith 1980:305)

Joseph believes God to be eternal, but he is now teaching that God has not always enjoyed the exalted status that he has today. He continues, “He was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ Himself did; and I will show it from the Bible”.

Here Joseph speaks to that pre-exaltation history of God the Father. God once lived on “an earth” (Smith 1980:305). He did not live on this Earth, but there was a time when God the Father was not full of glory and lived as a man on a planet as Jesus did. Joseph sees that Jesus follows a pattern set by God the Father. Just as Jesus laid down his body in order to take it up again in glory, so the Father before him did the same. Joseph does not think this is a peripheral topic. He presses,

> Here, then, is eternal life—to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power. (Smith 1980:306)

Smith expands the circle of discourse. Rather than confining himself to speak of God the Father and Jesus, he now widens the scope of what he is talking about to include each human. It was God’s potential and destiny to go from one capacity to another until he reached his exalted status. Having reached that state, as all gods have done before him, God organized spirit beings, and he leads them to follow his

example. On this model, Jesus is the prime example of one of God's organized beings who attained a fullness of divinity, and Joseph challenges others to follow suit.

For Joseph, this message is consoling, for it tells humans that though this life comes to an end, there is a life to come in which exalted humans "dwell in everlasting burnings in immortal glory", and "inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a god, and ascend to the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before". Joseph looks to Jesus as one who has accomplished this exaltation, and sees that Jesus looked to the Father who himself, on another earth, "worked out His kingdom with fear and trembling". Joseph imagines Jesus, and those who follow his example, getting a kingdom as they are exalted and presenting it to the Father, thus increasing his glory and allowing him to "take a higher exaltation". In so doing, man may "take his place, and thereby become exalted". In this manner humans may rise in exaltation and increase the glory and exaltation of God, just as the Father, in working out his kingdom, presents it to those who come before him to bring them eternal increase.

Having made these startling claims, Joseph moves to prove his position from the Bible. He begins by making some comments on the first sentence of the Bible. He focuses listeners' attention on the first word, "*Berosheit*". This word, he says, is a combination of three parts: *Baith*, *Roch* and *Sheit* (Smith 1980:307). *Baith*, Joseph says, is the word for "in, by, through". *Roch*, he claims means "the head". And *Sheit*—possibly taking a cue from his Hebrew instructor Joshua Seixas' Hebrew grammar book, which uses the word "termination" to refer to the feminine singular ending "it" (Barney 1997:113)—meaning "grammatical termination" (Smith 1980:307). Joseph next claims that "an old Jew without any authority" added the word *Baith* and so it should not be there. Joseph's next move has puzzled Hebrew scholars. Somehow, he moved to the translation, "The head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods". Smith interpreted this as meaning that "the head God brought forth the Gods in the grand council".

Explanations for how Joseph read that out of the text range from some people claiming that Smith's handling of the text is simply impossible and that he garbled the Hebrew, to others claiming Joseph must not have been translating the words directly but instead was emending and expanding the Hebrew into a phrase that could be translated, "the head one of the Gods brought forth the Gods" (Barney 1997:134). For the purpose of this project, it is more important to ascertain what Joseph meant by the "translation" than how it was produced.

Joseph was looking back to creation and wanted his hearers to understand that prior to this world being created,

> The head God called together the Gods and sat in grand council to bring forth the world. The grand councilors sat at the head in yonder heavens and contemplated the creation of the worlds which were created at the time. (Smith 1980:307)

This is important in the development of Joseph's teaching because it implies that at the beginning of our world, God, "the Father of the Gods" (Smith 1980:308) was already the head God. Joseph stresses this so that "we begin to learn the only true God, and what kind of a being we have got to worship".

Joseph points again to the Hebrew of Genesis 1:1, this time looking at the word "*baurau*", which is typically interpreted "create". He claims, instead, that it ought to be translated as "organize," in which case one could infer that "God had materials to organize the world" (Smith 1980:307). "Element," says Joseph, "had an existence from the time He had…They had no beginning and can have no end" (pp. 308-309). Joseph taught that just as God did not create matter, but organized it, so God did not create the mind of man, but organized it. The logic of this pattern leads to some startling conclusions.

Human souls, and all matter, have always existed in some form or another (Smith 1980:310). God organized that matter to make our world and our persons. But, we should be reminded, according to Joseph Smith, God was once like us. That is, he once worked out his kingdom on an earth. Thus, the inner logic of this

system of thought is that our “head God” was once unorganized intelligence, and some other being organized him and provided him a body. God is self-existing, but man exists “in like manner upon the same principles” (p. 310) and thus “the mind or the intelligence which man possesses is co-equal [co-eternal] with God himself”. Joseph argues that God, being a spirit himself, cannot create spirit. He says, “God never had the power to create the spirit of man at all. God himself could not create himself” (p. 311). God is not the originating point for spirit, for he is himself spirit. “Intelligence,” according to Joseph, “is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle”. God is the organizer of spirit into matter and persons, and in the same way, God was once organized himself from spirit to personhood.

Joseph revealed that God, from his exalted position, found himself in the midst of spirits and:

> because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge. He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with Himself, so that they might have one glory upon another, and all that knowledge, power, glory, and intelligence, which is requisite in order to save them in the world of spirits. (Smith 1980:312)

The situation, as Joseph reveals it, is one in which God, having already progressed, is filled with knowledge that the other spirits did not have. This knowledge, should they abide by it, could lead to their exaltation, and so God guides the spirits that they might become like him.

5.3.10 Opposition to the King Follett discourse and Joseph’s response

Joseph was facing fallout already before the King Follett discourse. He was under tremendous pressure regarding plural marriage. He was living plural marriage and had revealed it to some, but he faced pushback on the doctrine from his inner circle. Further, some missionaries had been teaching about “spiritual wives” and he was forced to condemn them publicly (Bushman 2005:526), which put him in an

awkward position of condemning people for teaching what he was already practicing and teaching. Adding to the pressure he was facing, a steady stream of immigrants were arriving and had to be accommodated (Bushman 2005:527). This financial pressure only highlighted the economic strain that already existed due to the building projects Joseph had obligated the church to undertake. These issues had caused a growing unrest in Nauvoo. As mentioned before, the 1844 King Follett discourse can be seen as an attempt to dispel dissent (Widmer 2000:116). Kurt Widmer has surmised, “When Smith took the podium at the April Conference, he was vindicating his calling in the eyes of his followers, and attempting to quiet the dissent among the inner circle” (p. 117).

Joseph may have won over some dissenters, but certainly not all. William Law, who was an Apostle in the church and had served in the first presidency, grew more outraged at Joseph Smith after the sermon. He could not tolerate “blasphemous doctrines” that point to “other gods as far above our God as he is above us” (Bushman 2005:537). Law attempted to reform the church by breaking off into a new organization based around the Book of Mormon and doctrines more akin to traditional Christianity (pp. 537–38). Within a month, Law had gathered around 300 at his reformed meetings.

Law also launched *The Nauvoo Expositor*, which was to be a weekly newspaper dealing with religious and political topics in Nauvoo. On June 7, 1844, the *Expositor* printed its one and only issue. Within the essays of the *Expositor* were blistering criticisms of Joseph Smith. The *Expositor* made Joseph’s plural marriages public and attacked the doctrine of a plurality of Gods. Joseph moved quickly to shut the paper down. He labelled the operation a nuisance and suggested the paper could provoke a mob spirit. After getting approval from the city council, Joseph--the Mayor--ordered the destruction of the press.

The destruction of the printing press did not sit well with many. A countywide meeting was held in Carthage on June 13, 1844, which “resolved to drive all the Saints in the outlying settlements into Nauvoo” (Bushman 2005:542). On Sunday, June 16, in the east grove in Nauvoo, Joseph preached his last sermon. In this

sermon, sometimes called the “sermon in the grove”, Joseph “defended himself against the criticisms levied by Law through the pages of that *Nauvoo Expositor*” (Widmer 2000:121). Rather than backtracking, Joseph doubled down on the doctrine of the plurality of Gods.

According to Thomas Bullock’s report of the sermon, Joseph started right off by taking the plurality of Gods as his topic. He took as his scripture Revelation 1:6: “And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him *be* glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen”.[2] After reading the verse, he affirmed that the translation is correct. Joseph uses this New Testament proof text to show God had a Father. This prepares his listeners for what is to come.

He says, “now you know that of late some have sprung up & apostat. & they declare that Pro bel[ieves] in a plurality of Gods” (Ehat and Cook 1980:378). Joseph’s first response is to note that he has always preached the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost to be “3 distinct personages & 3 Gods”.

Next Joseph maintains that,

> the apost[les] have disc[overe]d. that there were Gods above – God was the Far. Of our Ld. J.C. – my object was to preach the Scrip -- & preach the doctrine there being a God above the Far. Of our Ld. J.C. – I am bold to declare I have taut.

Joseph admits that he is teaching that there exists a God or Gods above God the Father. He also maintains that this belief was held by the apostles. He claims the “doctrine of a plurality of Gods is as prominent in the Bible as any doctrine”. Paul, Joseph points out, says “there are gods many & Lords many”. Joseph pauses a moment to clarify, “I say there are Gods many & Lds many but to us only one & we are to be in subject to that one” (Ehat and Cook 1980:379). While he advises the

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[2] Thomas Bullock’s report quotes Revelation 1:6 as the verse Joseph begins his sermon with, but he wrote that Joseph began with a quote from “3rd Rev. txt 6th v” (Ehat and Cook 1980:378). The McIntire Minute Book, which is much briefer than Thomas Bullock’s report on the whole, says “he commenced By Reading Rev. 1st Ch 6 verse” (p. 383).

hearers to serve only one God, he also teaches that there are others above the God he serves.

As in the King Follett discourse, Joseph turned to the Hebrew of Genesis 1 to show that “Eloiheam” should be plural. He believes Genesis 1:1 should read, “In the beginning…the heads of.. to organize the Gods – Eloiheam Eloi” (Ehat and Cook 1980:379). Later in Genesis 1, Smith claims the Bible should read, “The Head one of the Gods said, let us make man in our image”. If this is a reference to the story from *BAbr,* this “Head one of the Gods” is not the Father but Jesus, through whom the Father organized the heavens and the earth. Joseph goes on to say, “the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us”. While there is one God appointed for us to follow, he also is also teaching “intelligences exist one above anotr. that there is no end of it” (p. 380). Joseph supports this claim by reasoning, “if J.C was the Son of God & John discd. that god the Far. of J.C had a far, you may suppose that he had a Far. also – where was there ever a Son witht. a Far – where ever did tree or any thing spring into existence witht. a progenitor”. He is arguing that every new birth requires a progenitor, and that just as Jesus was organized by the Father, so the Father was organized by another being before him … and so on.

The preacher references six New Testament scriptures (all from the Apostle John) as proof texts. First, he quotes from 1 John 5:7–8, and then Jesus’s prayer in the garden, found in John 17:9-11, that his followers would be one just as he and the Father are one. Joseph’s summarizes this passage by saying that we will be “as God – & he as the God of his Far”. Joseph muses that for the traditional Christian, if one holds that there is only one God and they are all being incorporated into one being, you would end up with “the biggest God in all the world … he would be a Giant”. On Joseph’s interpretation, however, being one with God means being in agreement or harmony with God (1 Jn. 5:7–8). Thus, after exaltation, Jesus and all those who are exalted can be one without becoming the same substance. For Joseph, there is no problem with believing humans may rise up the ranks and become Gods.

The next two verses come fused together. He references John 5:19 and 10:17 saying, “J. sd. as the Far. wrought precisely in the same way as his Far. had done bef – as the Far. had done bef. – he laid down his life & took it up the same as his Far. had done bef. – he laid down his life & took it up again & was then committed unto him the keys…”. Jesus does what the Father did before him. What Jesus does is that he lays down his life and takes it up again. Thus, what did the Father do before him? The Father laid down his life and took it up again and was exalted. Joseph teaches that God was once a man on an earth who died and was resurrected and glorified. Jesus follows that pathway to glory, and Joseph exhorts his followers accept that as their potential as well.

Next Joseph relies on Jesus’ teaching in John 5:18 for support of his doctrine. In this passage, Jesus claims to be God’s son and “made himself equal with God” (Ehat and Cook 1980:381). Then Joseph quotes Jesus saying in John 10:33, , “it is written in your law I said Ye are Gods”. With Jesus’ teaching in John chapters five and ten, Joseph attempts to persuade his listeners that Jesus taught the plurality of Gods. If Jesus makes himself equal with God, are there not at least two Gods? If Jesus claimed those listening to him are Gods, are there not many Gods? While Bible scholars would disagree with Joseph’s interpretation of these texts, they make for powerful rhetoric. He is saying, *if you disagree with me, then you really disagree with Jesus.*

This sermon represents Joseph’s fullest teaching on the plurality of Gods available. He was killed just a few days later. The God of whom Joseph claims to be a prophet is but one of an infinite succession of Gods. Joseph’s “God had a father to whom He had ascended” (Bushman 2005:544). In the same way, all humans may follow that same trajectory and ascend to the glory of God.

5.3.11 Summary of Joseph’s teaching on the concept of God in 1844

Joseph Smith had taught that in “everlasting burnings” of celestial glory we can be as God, just as God is as his father before him and so on (Ehat and Cook

1980:380). He claimed to have learned this truth through “translating the papyrus”. In his “sermon on the grove,” Joseph taught that in BAbr, one learns that “intelligences exist one above anotr. that there is no end to it” (cf. BAbr 3:18). Joseph sees this tenet pointing to another fact about God. He sees that if Jesus is the son of God, then “god the Far. of J.C. had a far. you may suppose that he had a Far. also– where was there ever a son witht. a Far”. Joseph seems to envision a deity who rules over this planet, but who is subordinate to Gods above him. God had not always been God but had been deified through progression. This understanding surfaced late in Joseph Smith’s career as prophet of the LDS Church. In fact, “no record can be found during most of the first decade of the Church in which Joseph Smith or any of his associates explicitly taught a plurality of Gods” (Harrell 2011:120).

What does seem to be an enduring, if not developing, theme in Joseph Smith’s teaching on God is God’s corporeal nature. God is an exalted human. He creates, not by bringing something from nothing, but by organizing matter that is already endowed with intelligence of varying degree. The elements exist eternally alongside God. God exists in time, and has developed over time, attaining exaltation at some point in the past (White 1987:63). Joseph Smith’s emphasis, especially in this teaching in April and June of 1844, seems to be the sameness of God. Humans are in the same situation as God once was, and humans have the same opportunity to be exalted.

5.4 Development of the doctrine of God as it was synthesized in the early 20th Century

Following Joseph Smith’s death, a number of claimants rose up to assume the mantle of prophet, seer, and revelator for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the August 1844 meeting, however, Brigham Young was sustained as the new President with little resistance (Bushman 2005:557). Young, like Joseph, believed God to be a glorified and exalted human and that humans can progress to

become God (Widmer 2000:140). Young also believed that God, though exalted, continues to progress eternally (Givens 2015:96). The Book of Abraham (3:18) pointed to intelligences existing one above another with no end of it, and Young had no trouble imagining the Father taking on mortality and developing into the God he is today and continuing to progress over time (p. 103). That is not to say there was no pushback against this idea within the LDS leadership. Some, like early LDS apostle Orson Pratt, and later, general authorities B.H. Roberts and apostle Charles Penrose, held instead to an "absolutist" idea of God in which after God was exalted, he ceased to progress (Widmer 2000:137).

In 1852, Brigham Young began to propound what has become known as the Adam-God doctrine. Young taught that when "our father Adam came into the garden of Eden he came into it with a celestial body, and brought Eve, one of his wives, with him" (JOD 1:50). This Adam, taught Young, "is our Father and our God, and the only God with whom we have to do". Young believed that Jesus was "not begotten by the Holy Ghost". "Jesus," taught Young, "was begotten in the flesh by the same character that was in the garden of Eden, and who is our Father in Heaven" (p. 1:51). Brigham Young continued to teach this doctrine throughout his life, and he chastised other leaders for not teaching it. He even went so far as to demand that the doctrine be part of the message pronounced as the culmination of the Mormon temple endowment ceremony (Givens 2015:115; Widmer 2000:132). While this appears to have thus been the official teaching of the church for a few years, it seems to have lacked sticking power, and the LDS Church moved away from that teaching after Young's death. It was even called a "false doctrine" by Spencer W. Kimball at a conference talk in 1976 (Givens 2015:116).

What has remained engrained in the LDS concept of God is Joseph Smith's view of God as a progressive being. This idea was expressed well by Lorenzo Snow in his famous verse: "As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be" (Intellectual Reserve 2012:83)". Ronald Huggins has demonstrated that poem's sticking power in the LDS Church (Huggins 2006b). Not only did Snow stand by his verse throughout his life and as the Prophet of the LDS Church, but the LDS Church

has continued to affirm the statement. In its 2012 Church manual, *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Lorenzo Snow*, the LDS Church points out that this couplet was a sacred communication given to Snow which he taught only after Joseph Smith had taught the doctrine publicly (Intellectual Reserve 2012:83). “Snow's couplet summarizes a truth that still lives at the heart and logical center of the whole Mormon religious system” (Huggins 2006b:568).

Much of twentieth-century teaching about God within Mormonism rests on the theology written by LDS Apostles James Talmage, John Widtsoe, and general authority B.H. Roberts (Widmer 2000:7,141). Each of these men defended Joseph Smith’s view of God as a perfected man (Givens 2015:104). In his 1915 treatise, *Rational Theology*, Widtsoe argued that “it is only logical to believe that a progressive God has not always possessed His present position”. He believed that,

> By the persistent efforts of will, His recognition of universal laws became greater until he attained at last a conquest over the universe, which to our finite understanding seems absolutely complete. We may be certain that, through self-effort, the inherent and innate power of God has been developed to a God-like degree. Thus He has become God. (Givens 2015:104)

LDS Apostle James Talmage claimed that Jesus’ self-description as the “Son of Man” meant Jesus understood “His Father to be the one and only supremely exalted man” (Talmage 1915:143). Roberts concurred with Talmage’s assessment in his published paper in the 1906 *Improvement Era*, which was approved by the First Presidency. In this document, Roberts says that humans are made of the same kind of essence as God, and so are also uncreated, self-existent, indestructible, and eternal (Roberts 1906). Roberts stresses that though it is proper for humans to worship God the Father alone, this does not “strike out of existence the many other Gods and Lords that live and have dominion in other worlds” (Roberts 1898:768). God, B.H. Roberts remembers Joseph Smith teaching, had a father himself, and thus there exists a plurality of Gods (pp. 765–766).

Widmer observes that characteristic of Talmage, Roberts, and Widtsoe is a belief that “intelligences” existed prior to the person of God. God, in a personal sense, had a beginning, but the intelligences did not; they are eternal (Widmer

2005:145). While intelligences are eternal and self-existent, they are organized by Gods and may learn to progress to an exalted state. Within the grand scope of eternity, Roberts conceived of “unnumbered millions of worlds”, each governed by a Godhead of Gods who had “passed through the changes and developments necessary to their perfection” (Roberts 1888). As early LDS Apostle Parley Pratt said, humans and Gods are “of one species, one race, one great family, widely diffused among the planetary systems” (Pratt 1877:33).

There does seem to be some debate among early LDS leaders regarding where God sits in the pecking order of the Gods. In *BAbr*, God is represented as saying that there are many spirits, one more intelligent than the next one, and that God regards himself as “more intelligent than they all” (BAbr 3:19). The question some LDS leaders have struggled with seems to be, “Is this describing the God of our world?”, or “Is this describing some other Deity higher up the exaltation ladder?” Along with this question comes another: “If God had a father, can the God with whom we have to do ever eclipse the glory of those who were exalted before him?”

LDS apostle Stephen L. Richards wrote a short work called *About Mormonism*. In this work, he attempts to give a sociological, economic, doctrinal, and historical description of the LDS Church. In the “Doctrinal” section, Richards notes that humans, through progression owing to one’s practiced “goodness”, may ultimately become “as intelligent and as omnipotent as God, Himself” (Richards 1944:10). If this were true, then perhaps it would be possible for a human to one day be as or more intelligent than God himself. If God’s being holds the capacity for eternal increase, then, since on Mormonism we are of the same kind as God – Gods in embryo so to speak – perhaps we can rise to a comparable exalted status as God the Father (Talmage 1914:51–52). If this is possible, then Abraham 3:19 could in fact mean that God, while once “much less powerful than He is today” (Hunter 1945:114), now recognizes that he has risen to the loftiest exalted status. Parley Pratt’s *Key to the Science of Theology* seems to affirm this option. While he notes that all Gods, angels, and humans are all of one species or race, he believes God our Father is the Supreme Head over all other beings. Jesus, the Son of God –

and presumably the Holy Ghost – make up a grand Head which is over all subordinate Gods.

Brigham Young may beg to differ on the interpretation of the Book of Abraham. In his teaching on creation, Young identified the God of this world as Michael the Archangel. This God was among other Gods in a grand council of sorts, and he was chosen to create and then, apparently, live on this earth as Adam (Givens 2015:114; c.f. Young 2009:1:518). In this view, God, his first son Jesus, and the Holy Ghost form a Godhead over this planet, but they are not the Supreme Head over all other Gods. Young chastised Orson Pratt for apparently thinking God had reached the zenith and could progress no more, yet for Young that did not mean God could ascend to the head of the Gods, since other Gods are also increasing (JOD 11:286).

B.H. Roberts found no fault with Young's Adam-God doctrine (Roberts 1903:42–43), nor did he find it hard to believe that the God of this world may have other Gods that rank higher than the God of this world. He understood the Godhead to be but one "presidency" among "unnumbered millions" of other worlds, "each presided over by a presidency or godhead" (Roberts 1888:115–118; cf. Roberts 1898:769). Roberts believed that while Adam/Michael may well be the creator of this world described in BAbr 4 and is the only God with whom man has to do and who will inherit this earth, the God of this earth is not the Supreme Head over all the Gods (Roberts 1903:42). With this outlook, one might conclude either that the God of Abraham 3:19 is not the God we worship, or that the God of Abraham 3:19 was indeed the most intelligent within the limited set of potential Gods from his generation. Either way one understands Abraham 3:19, the text speaks of a God who had progressed to an exalted position among the Gods. This God appointed other Gods to organize our world. These other Gods begin their work in Abraham 4, and that chapter mirrors Genesis 1, only it is "Gods" who say the "let there be…" rather than "God". It would seem that there is an "endless chain of exalted beings", and while the God that humans are said to worship is the most intelligent one we can know, there may be others who are exalted higher still (McConkie 1985:244).

LDS apostle Bruce R. McConkie tries to bring clarity. On the one hand, he describes God as “the supreme and absolute Being; the ultimate source of the universe” (McConkie 1966:317). However, McConkie admits that Joseph Smith taught that there is “a God above the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 322). Thus, for McConkie, while it is appropriate to brand the God of this world as the “God of Gods”, that label is also appropriate for all those who, one day, become exalted beings (pp. 322–23).

God’s progression, whether ongoing or complete, bears witness to a deep law that governs all intelligences in the LDS conception. To have risen to exaltation, it was necessitated that each God walk the path to godhood in which the requisite character was developed through obedience to eternal moral precepts (White 1984:65–66). As God recognized and embraced universal laws, he progressed (Widtsoe 1932:175). B.H. Roberts taught that as long as intelligences have existed, laws have also existed. He called the grand power that governs eternal progression “the priesthood”, which he dubs the “power of the Gods” (Roberts 1888:115–18). As God learned the “laws of truth” and obeyed, he continued to progress (Hunter 1945:114). LDS philosopher Truman Madsen has opined: “God himself became God by the mastery of the same ultimate and unchanging conditions to which you and I are subject” (Madsen 1970:57). Terryl Givens summarizes this point:

> Most Mormons understand that the process by which humans acquire the divine nature is the same by which God maintains his; conformity to the eternal laws that govern the realm of spirit and matter. (Givens 2015:65)

God, for the LDS theologian, became an exalted being “through obedience to the same eternal Gospel truths that we are given the opportunity to obey” (Hunter 1945:104). God may be thought of as the author of truth, not by creating the laws by which humans may progress, but by “conforming his actions to all truth” (Hunter 1945:115). In this sense, an individual human who follows God’s path and acquires all the knowledge needed to understand and obey these laws may also be spoken of as the author of truth. This, in fact, is the LDS path to Godhood (White 1987:65).

5.5 Summary and implications

While not every LDS Church leader expresses himself the same way, there is a general consensus that in addition to the three Gods comprising the godhead, "an infinite number of Gods exist, even above the God we worship" (Harrell 2011:105). While the earliest writings of Joseph Smith do not veer far from traditional Christian teaching, he taught a plurality of Gods by the end of his life, with God our Father himself having a father (and so on). "Smith's teaching gave rise to the belief in an endless hierarchy of Gods with each presiding over an ever-expanding dominion of creations" (p. 115). God acquired knowledge, and with that advancement came ever more power. Humans follow that same path and so are allowed "endless advancement" (Alexander 1980:29).

Joseph Smith's most mature thinking, as well as the doctrinal ideas developed by LDS leaders in the generations following Joseph Smith, speak of a God that is:

1. Personal and embodied: The LDS God is an exalted human with a glorified body. God is thought of as a "personage of flesh and bones", and a human's body is thought to be "like his body" (Gospel Principles 2009:6; Beckwith 1991:39).
2. The organizer of the world: The LDS God organizes pre-existent matter in creation. Matter is as eternal and indestructible as God and is the primary element of all existence (Beckwith 1997:99). The basic constituents of the universe have always existed in one form or another (Mosser 2012:21). Terryl Givens summarizes this point poetically: "God is part of the universe, master architect but not master magician" (Givens 2015:64). God is thought to use existing natural laws to organize matter in accord with eternal law. He is not considered the creator or sustainer of matter (Beckwith 1991:39, 43).
3. Limited in power: Joseph Smith's God is powerful, but while some LDS theologians use the term "omnipotent" to describe God's power, they are not doing so in a standard Christian way (Robson 1983:21). God is said to have "all power" (Gospel Principles 1978:6) but is thought to be unable to create or

destroy matter. Further, as noted in point 9 below, God does not create eternal laws but “exercises power by knowing and using the laws that govern the universe” (Beckwith 1997:100). God’s power does not transcend the cosmos (Mosser 2012:28-29).

4. Limited in knowledge: God in traditional LDS thought is a progressive being, and so continues to gain knowledge (Talmage 1914:52; Beckwith 1991:41).
5. Mutable: In traditional LDS writings stretching back to Joseph Smith, God is thought to have begun as an intelligence and progressed to become God (Talmage 1914:103). While LDS theology believes God to be highly developed, he is nonetheless changeable (Mosser 2012:21).
6. Limited by space and time: God, as an embodied being who changes over time, is subject to both spatial and temporal limitations. Though God’s influence in LDS theology is thought to be everywhere present through the power of the Holy Ghost, he is not personally present everywhere (Beckwith 1991:42; Ostler 1984:76).
7. Contingent: God’s existence and nature are not necessary. Heavenly Father depended on other beings for his exaltation.
8. Comparable: God, in LDS theology, had a father who is as instrumental in his exaltation as our Heavenly Father is to ours. Thus, God is dependent on other Gods who had been exalted previously to himself. This metaphysical pluralism points to numerous entities that are comparable to God (Mosser 2012:21). In fact, all humans, through eternal progression, may reach the heights of exaltation of God himself. We can be, in the words of LDS apostle Stephen Richards, as intelligent and omnipotent as God (Richards 1944:10).
9. Bound by eternal laws: While God is thought to be perfectly moral, but this perfection was acquired by means of a developmental process in which God learned pre-existing laws (Givens 2015:63). Eternal laws exist independently of God, and God, to progress, must recognize and embrace those eternal laws (p. 60; c.f. Pratt 1877:37; Widtsoe 1932:175). These laws are not only independent of God, but also out of his control (Robson 1983:21; Ostler 1984:87).

10. Eternal: While not eternally exalted, the intelligence that forms God's inner being has always existed and is indestructible. In Mormonism, all humans (and all matter more generally) share this same reality (Roberts 1903:401–423).

5.6 Introduction to contemporary non-official Mormon voices on the doctrine of God

There are two other views of God from within the LDS Church that have been advanced in recent years. Though neither of these can claim to speak authoritatively, and while neither of these seems to have any institutional support from the modern LDS apostles and prophets, they do seem to be held by a growing number of LDS adherents. The first view I'll consider is the view advanced by what has been labelled the LDS neo-orthodox movement. The second view to be considered is the view advanced by Blake Ostler, and can be labelled kingship monotheism, or monarchotheism.

5.6.1 Neo-orthodox voices on the doctrine of God

As early as 1967, a discernible movement of LDS theologians began to speak about God in differing ways than the traditional synthesis outlined above (Mosser 2002:77). While the theology of Joseph Smith and other early leaders tended to stress the sameness of God to humankind, Mormon neo-orthodox theologians tend to emphasize the otherness of God, a definitive discontinuity between God and humans (White 1970:12–13). Neo-orthodox descriptions of God often emphasize the differences between God and men, while traditional LDS descriptions of God tend to emphasize their similarities (White 1970:13). Rather than focusing on Joseph Smith's latter teachings as much of the traditional LDS theologians had done, neo-orthodox theologians tend to emphasize LDS standard works (White 1987:139).

Robert Millet, an exemplar of the neo-orthodox movement, argues that the deification of humans means we may share “in the nature of God and in the life of Christ” (Millet 2012:259). While Millet understands there to be “no barrier beyond which human beings may not progress spiritually” (pp. 264–265), nonetheless he is unwilling to say that all of God’s attributes are communicable (p. 269). While Millet sees value in the LDS view of God in that it seems to him to make Heavenly Father more accessible and relatable, he is quick to add that he does not believe humans may ever “unseat” God the Father from his lofty position over us, nor will humans ever shed their need to worship God (Millet et al. 2011:267). While admitting that the LDS God and humans are of the same species, Millet points to the immense “chasm between a fallen, mortal being and an immortal, resurrected, and glorified Being” (Millet 2012:270). The traditional view, while also insisting that humans will never displace God or cease to be obliged to worship God, tends to emphasize our likeness with God, our trajectory in which humans, through their goodness, may progress to be “as intelligent and as omnipotent as God, Himself” (Richards 1944:10). The neo-orthodox writers do not deny this eternal progression, but rather, they tend to emphasize the otherness of God rather than our potential to be like him.

The neo-orthodox strategy appears to be approaching the traditional Christian conception of God as close as possible without abandoning central Mormon beliefs. This means stressing the enormous present difference between God and humans, while not denying the future possibility of bridging that divide. By stressing a “developmental process” (Millet 2016:201), Millet is able to hold both God’s present greatness in comparison to other creatures and humankind’s potential to be as omnipotent and great as God. Similarly, in BYU professor Stephen Robinson’s discussion with evangelical Christian Craig Blomberg, Robinson emphasizes first the attributes of God that we do not currently share with God (Blomberg and Robinson 1997:77), while later admitting that Latter-day Saints “maintain that God’s work is to *remove* the distinctions and barriers between us and to make us what God is” (p. 81, italics in original).

Brad Wilcox, another BYU professor, has emphasized God's perfection in distinction to our imperfection, while also positing that God's goal in the atonement is "not just being *with* God, but being *like* God" (Wilcox 2009:68, italics in original). Wilcox sees the atonement as a "doctrine of human development" (p. 69), meaning it does more than cover sins; it changes humans, lifting their nature to be exalted like Christ.

Another BYU professor, Camille Fronk, also emphasizes the differences between us and God in her use of the analogy of the potter and the clay. To Fronk, the analogy reminds us that God moulds and shapes us, governs our affairs, and directs our paths (Fronk 2003:11–13). She also maintains that humans reflect God's likeness, being created in his image (p. 24). In this, Fronk intends more than the traditional Christian sense of being created to reflect God's glory or standing as his representatives in the earth. Rather, she is affirming the LDS belief that God's "ultimate design for us" is to bring us from imperfection to perfection (p. 49, 78).

While neo-orthodox voices may emphasize the distinctiveness of God over humans, the difference is one of emphasis and not a departure from traditional LDS teaching. Neo-orthodox voices tend to "accept the traditional metaphysics" of traditional LDS thought (White 1987:90). These theologians maintain that plurality of Gods and human deification is "firmly and officially asserted by the LDS Church" (Blomberg 1997:85). While God is infinite, Millet reminds us that God created man to be like Him, "growing up from the low state of manhood, to become gods, like unto our father in heaven" (Millet 2011a:365).

5.6.2 Other non-traditional voices on the doctrine of God

Another view that has gained some attention in recent years is represented by the writings of Blake Ostler. In his three-volume *Exploring Mormon Thought*, Ostler seeks to clarify the Mormon concept of God for theologians and philosophers (Ostler 2001:xi). He does so in the tradition of analytic philosophical theology

(Paulsen:forward,Ostler 2001:xv). His work can be seen as a “systematic attempt to provide a reasoned account of LDS theism” (McLachlan 2003:195).

For Ostler, though there may be many beings like God, sharing many of his attributes, there is only one God. God possesses his attributes and powers in a unique and exclusive way (Ostler 2001:7). Ostler is cognizant that the term “God” is often used in Mormon thought to designate a person who is like God, such as divine beings that make up the divine council and humans who become gods thorough exaltation (pp. 8-9). Still, for Ostler, there is “a single, supreme member of the class ‘God Almighty’” (p. 7). There is, Ostler contends, a Supreme God who created the world and who possesses “divinity necessarily and not contingently or in dependence on some more ultimate being” (p. 10). This head God presides over the council of gods.

Ostler recognizes that this view is not a mainstream view in LDS thought. He says,

> I believe that until recently almost all Mormons believed that Joseph Smith taught that God progressed to become fully divine from a lower state of non-divinity. Thus, it was believed that God the Father became God; before that, he was something less than God. During the eternal time period before which he was “God,” or fully divine, he worshipped and was subject to another God, who was more ultimate than he was. (Ostler 2008:17)

Ostler has a different understanding of Joseph Smith’s teaching. He believes Joseph Smith taught that there exists a Most High God, and that while other beings may possess a fulness of the properties essential to divinity, there remains one being greater than the rest. All other divine beings are subordinate to and submit to the will of this Head God. Ostler, following Mark Smith (2001a, 2001b), argues the original God of Judaism was El, and this God, who is distinct from Yahweh, appointed Yahweh to be Israel’s God (pp. 47-50). This is what Ostler labels “kingship monotheism” (Ostler 2008:68,76). This view, Ostler maintains, is “precisely the Mormon view” of God (p. 76).

Ostler draws out several implications of his view. First, the Head God is contingently fully divine. Ostler believes that though the Head God exists necessarily, he exists as fully divine in a contingent way in that his exalted nature is "dependent upon the love of the other divine persons" (Ostler 2001:465). This love is not logically necessary, and thus it is possible for members of the Godhead to freely choose not to love. Ostler believes that it would be irrational for the members of the Godhead to choose to stop loving one another, and that due to their rationality, they would not do so. However, it is possible to reject what is in actuality the greatest good for a variety of reasons. A free agent might not know what the greatest possible good is and so settle for a lesser good. A free agent might believe that it is better to be the highest in command and so reject a submissive role in a loving relationship in order to seek to become the highest in command with the opportunity to begin new loving relationships. A free agent might have a rational lapse and make a mistake and irreparably damage the loving relationship. A free agent might intentionally harm another being for fun. Ostler, I'm sure, does not suppose God or any member of the godhead would do such a thing, but it is not logically impossible for God to do evil on Ostler's view (Ostler 2006:87). For these and likely numerable more reasons, I believe Ostler is mistaken that this contingently exalted being can be said to have a metaphysically necessary existence in the Godhead.

Second, the Head God is mutable. Ostler, at times, describes his view of God as immutable, but he uses the term "immutable" in a non-standard way. He believes the Head God can divest himself of the fulness of divinity in an incarnation event, and that it is possible for him to never gain back that fulness. Ostler believes that the Head God's exaltation, following an incarnation, is "virtually assured" due to the rationality of the other members of the Godhead who would surely not divest themselves of exalting powers at the same time, but it is not necessary (Ostler 2001:377). Practically speaking, then, Ostler believes the Head God to be immutable in the sense that he will assuredly be exalted eternally, even if he divests himself of the fulness of divinity for a time. However, Ostler also believes that "it is

logically possible that God could perform a morally wrong act" (p. 90). In fact, God could perform innumerable evil deeds. Thus, were God to humble himself and take on flesh for a time, there is no guarantee that he would be worthy of exaltation following his mortal sojourn. Carl Mosser has seen the "metaphysical possibility for God to cease being supremely good and thus fall from his status as a God" (Mosser 2012:23) as a point of departure of LDS theology from traditional Christian thought. The problem seems much graver given Ostler's point of view. His sort of "practical immutability" gets at the heart of a major departure from traditional Christian views of God, in which God is essentially and necessarily immutable.

Third, the Head God is limited in knowledge. Ostler believes the Head God to be more limited in knowledge than traditional theists would hold about God. For Ostler, God knows all that can be known but "does not know which future contingents will be actual with certainty" (Ostler 2001:327). This seems problematic on several fronts. First, this view seems to place the preceding view of God's practical immutability in jeopardy for the following reason. If God cannot know for certain that the other members of the Godhead would remain in glory or would choose to exalt him, it may not be rational for him to divest himself of the fulness of his glory. Since God is supremely rational, it would seem foolish to act in a way that jeopardizes his divinity without being certain he would recover his exalted position. Secondly, without fully knowing the future, God is forced to take "risks" in whom he will trust. Ostler's God does not know with certainty how things will turn out.

Fourth, the Head God is limited in power. Ostler holds that other creatures can thwart God's plans (Ostler 2001:113). Though God may work to influence other free creatures, God cannot "guarantee that his persuasive efforts will be actualized" (p. 114). Ostler calls God omnipotent, but he defines omnipotence in a non-standard way. Agent *A*, for Ostler, is omnipotent if *A* is able unilaterally to "bring about any logically possible state of affairs *SA* which does not entail that '*A* did not bring about *SA*'" (p. 115). This account of God's omnipotence limits God's power in remarkable ways. God is called omnipotent, but the definition allows for free agents to bring about states of affairs God is unable to stop. God's power is greatly

diminished in that he is only able to unilaterally bring about those states of affairs he can bring about. I suppose I may be omnipotent in this sense. For Ostler, the obdurate will of a free agent is not deposable, and thus God's plans are not sure. While traditional theists may hold that God does not, in general, violate human free wills, I do not think it is because they believe that he could not. Rather, they typically hold that he need not, given his complete knowledge of counterfactuals and ability to control what possible world is actualized.

Fifth, the Head God has held the place of supremacy over all other beings eternally. While Ostler notes that this view of God as beginningless appears to be at odds with the King Follett discourse, he believes that on a closer reading, his view is actually consistent with Joseph Smith's teaching (Ostler 2006:93). We will assess this claim in the next chapter.

5.6.4 Summary of contemporary non-orthodox views of God within Mormonism

The neo-orthodox views I have examined appear to maintain the metaphysical commitments of traditional Mormon thinking about God (White 1987:90). The difference, it appears, is more one of emphasis than actual theological departure. The same cannot be said for the view of Blake Ostler. His view represents a major departure from traditional LDS theism in at least two major ways.

First, while traditional Mormon theology seems content to suppose that God himself once had a Father and progressed to receive a fullness of deity, Ostler believes that God is the Head God who reigns supreme over all other gods.

Secondly, traditional Mormon theology believes God was not exalted at time *t*, and then, through his obedience to eternal laws, progressed to become fully divine at *t*1. In contrast, Ostler believes God did not need to progress to become fully God but has been fully divine for all eternity. Ostler does believe that God may

have become incarnate at some point, but that that incarnational event was not an effort to become exalted, but to, perhaps, grow in knowledge through experience (Ostler 2006:447). For Ostler, though, God was fully divine prior to his mortal sojourn, and he was fully divine after that event.

Chapter six: Mormon theism and the moral argument for God's existence

6.1 Introduction

Thus far I have argued that the moral argument is a good argument for the existence of God. I have also shown that God, as he is represented in the Bible, is compatible with the moral argument. That is to say, the Christian God is compatible with the moral argument for God's existence. In this chapter, I will ask whether the same can be said of the God of Mormon theism. If the God of Mormon theism is compatible with the moral argument, then that argument, while providing evidence for God, would not seem to favour either LDS or biblical Christianity's God over the other. However, if the moral argument is not compatible with the God of Mormon theism, then the moral argument would provide evidence for the Christian God's existence, and would, at the same time, serve as a defeater for the existence of the God of Mormon theology. In what follows, Francis Beckwith's critique of Mormon theism on the basis of the moral argument will be highlighted. Next, Blake Ostler's criticism of Beckwith's argument will be introduced. Finally, I will offer a rebuttal to Ostler's criticism, thus vindicating the spirit of Beckwith's argument.

6.2 Introduction to Francis Beckwith's critique of Mormon theism *via* the moral argument

In 1981, Kim McCall articulated several problems with the concept of moral obligation within Mormon thought. McCall notes that within Christian thought, humans are creatures, and thus subject to the divine commands of God. Thus, the God of Christian theology, in McCall's estimation, can provide a solid grounding for objective moral values and duties (McCall 1981:28). However, within Mormon theology, humans do not owe their ultimate existence to God and both God and humans are subject to eternal laws (p. 27). For McCall, this highlights two problems.

First, on Mormonism, humans are ontologically independent of God, and so God's right to command us needs some other grounding. McCall argues that one could take God's commands as a "road map to happiness", but this simply reduces morality to mere "counsels of prudence" (McCall 1981:30). If this is the case, then morality is not truly prescriptive, but only prudential. Morality would fail to escape its teleological orbit, merely helping people reach a desired end. Yet McCall believes this to be an utterly unsatisfying answer, as it does not line up with our basic intuitions about morality—that some acts are evil and some are good. Our moral intuitions push us to see that, more than just producing a good or bad end for a person or producing happiness, some acts, no matter how much happiness they might bring a person, are objectively wrong.

Second, McCall notes that if the LDS saying "Obedience is the first law of heaven" (McConkie 1966:359; Church Educational System 2004:46-47) is correct, then it seems that according to Mormon thought there is an eternal and universal set of laws that serves as the grounding for moral action (McCall 1981:30). This resonates with Joseph Smith's vision of God the Father progressing through obedience to take his station as an exalted being. He progresses as he obeys this eternal law and thus is himself subject to moral laws that exist outside of him. In that case, he cannot be the ultimate ground for objective moral values and duties.

McCall pushes LDS philosophers to look beyond God for the source of moral obligation since God is a part of nature rather than causally underlying it as in Christian theism (Sears 2000:78). It is likely due to this problem that LDS philosopher Rex Sears has opined that moral arguments for God's existence "are virtually absent from the Mormon tradition" (Sears 2000:73). God, in traditional Mormon thinking, is not the ultimate source of moral values and duties or of power, since, like us, he derives his exalted status from another source based on his obedience to moral laws that exist outside himself. This conceptual difference between LDS and traditional Christian theism may stand behind the minimal usage of this argument by LDS philosophers, but it has not caused philosophers to remain unreflective concerning Mormon theism and the moral argument.

6.2.1 Beckwith and Parrish's *The Mormon Concept of God*

In 1991, Francis Beckwith and Stephen Parrish published a philosophical analysis of the Mormon concept of God (Beckwith and Parrish 1991). They highlight the fact that the traditional beliefs of Mormon theism include the belief that God is subject to values and principles external to himself. Beckwith and Parrish are not the only thinkers to see this implication of Mormon thought. While LDS philosopher David Paulsen affirms that God in Mormon theology "perfectly exemplifies every moral value", Paulsen also affirms that God's "perfections are not eternal, but were acquired by means of developmental process" (Paulsen 1975:79). There exist "primal laws and principles" to which God is subject, and it is through obedience to such laws that God himself "earned the right to be 'god'" (Paulsen 1975:79). Regarding the relationship between the traditional LDS conception and the moral law, Beckwith concludes:

> Since God Himself came into being as God (although he existed in some state eternally), He cannot be the source and sanction of values. He Himself obeys laws and affirmed values for whose existence he is not responsible. (Beckwith and Parrish 1991:44)

In his 1996 review of Beckwith and Parrish's book, LDS philosopher Blake Ostler responds with three substantive criticisms. Ostler's first response to this moral problem is not to attempt to locate the ground for moral values and duties within God as the theist would insist, but instead claims that a God who is himself subject to external moral laws is preferable because it allows for God to be a moral agent (Ostler 1996:125). Ostler is concerned that the traditional Christian view makes it logically impossible for God to make a morally wrong decision, and thus he does not see how God could be a moral agent.

Second, Ostler claims that locating moral values and duties in God's nature makes morality arbitrary (Ostler 1996:126). He reasons, "If God's nature is logically prior to God's will, then God is stuck with whatever his nature happens to dictate – and in this sense moral values are clearly arbitrary". Ostler contends that Christian

theism's view of morality is arbitrary because had God's nature been antagonistic to Jews, it may have been his will that they be destroyed, and thus it may have been the case that our "entire moral duty consists in murdering six million Jews".

Third, Ostler finds that Beckwith and Parrish reduce morality to loving one another, and thus he believes they have effectively "abandoned the divine command theory" in favour of locating moral values and duties in "love" as the ultimate moral principle (Ostler 1996:126). These three objections find rejoinders from Beckwith in his later writing.

6.2.2 Beckwith and Parrish's *See the Gods Fall*

In 1997, Francis Beckwith again teamed up with Stephen Parrish in a book titled *See the Gods Fall*, in which they gave philosophical attention to four "rivals" to Christian theism. Mormonism was evaluated as one of those four rivals. The authors are careful to note that "Mormons are pluriform in their beliefs" (Beckwith and Parrish 1997:97). They identify two dominant strands, one of which is what I've called traditional Mormon theism, and the other is what Beckwith calls monarchotheistic (what Ostler sometimes calls kingship monotheism).

The authors note that even if God in Mormon thought is conceived of as "good" in the sense that God "fulfills all the duties of a god flawlessly" (p. 103), still God is understood to be good as compared to some external standard (p. 104). The Mormon God, either in the traditional or monarchotheistic account, may be good, but is not necessarily good. Further, many Mormon thinkers grant that God was not always morally perfect but that he progressed to that state "by means of a developmental process" (Paulsen 1975:79). Thus, "if the gods *became* good, they cannot be the basis of good" (Beckwith and Parrish 1997:104). God, in Mormon thought, has progressed to hold a divine nature and does not exemplify such a nature eternally or necessarily. Since God could have failed to hold a good nature, he cannot be the basis for necessary laws of morality (p. 125).

Beckwith and Parrish offer further details of God as he is understood in the Christian tradition that shed light on several of Ostler's critiques of their earlier work. First, Ostler thought the Christian God deficient in that he could not make a morally wrong decision. Beckwith and Parrish argue that it is "meaningless" to talk of God's doing wrong morally since "there is no legitimate standard apart from him by which he may be judged. Whatever he does is good, for the simple reason that he does it" (Beckwith and Parrish 1997:74). For Beckwith and Parrish, it does not make sense to evaluate the standard of objective morality, since to do so would require some standard with which it is evaluated. Beckwith and Parrish admit that "God is not good in the same way that humans beings are…God is not subject to external moral laws…. He is not moral in the sense of following laws external to himself". It is no moral deficiency to be the standard for moral values and duties.

Second, Ostler claims morality in Christian theology is arbitrary in that it is tied to God's nature. Ostler seems to base his objection on the mistaken view that God's nature could have been other than it is. But this is to misunderstand what Christian thinkers mean when they say that God's nature is "necessary". What is meant is that there is no possible world in which God's nature is not as it is. God's nature serves as the grounding for objective moral values and duties, and because his nature is necessary, moral values and duties "cannot be arbitrary" (Beckwith and Parrish 1997:74). The Mormon God, on either the traditional or monarchotheistic view, cannot be logically necessary since there is no contradiction entailed by his failing to exist (p. 105).

6.2.3 Beckwith in *The New Mormon Challenge*

In his 2002 chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge*, Francis Beckwith offers his fullest treatment on Mormon theism and morality (Beckwith 2002). In this work, Beckwith again acknowledges that there is more than one stream of thought when it comes to theology in LDS thinking. He notes two primary views, which he dubs "1) plurality of finite gods theology, and 2) monarchotheism, a view that holds that there

is one eternally existing but finite God" (p. 461). These views line up well with what I've earlier called the "traditional LDS" view and the view Ostler appears to sympathize with, "kingship monotheism". Because Beckwith views the traditional LDS view as the dominant view, his critique in this work focuses on that view.

The heart of Beckwith's chapter is his claim that the Mormon God cannot be the ultimate grounding for objective moral values and duties. He gives several lines of reasoning for that claim. First, in Mormon thought, God was elevated to his divine status in virtue of his obedience to moral laws he was obligated to obey. As Mormon general authority Milton Hunter has remarked, "He became God – as exalted being – through obedience to the same eternal Gospel truths that we are given opportunity today to obey" (Hunter 1945:104). How did God "become glorified"? Hunter answers, "God undoubtedly took advantage of every opportunity to learn the laws of truth and as He became acquainted with each new verity He righteously obeyed it" (p. 114). LDS philosopher Truman Madsen concurs, "God himself became God by the mastery of the same ultimate and unchanging conditions to which you and I are subject" (Madsen 1970:57). It seems that on Mormonism, moral truth is external to and learned by God, and that God cannot thusly be the ultimate source or ground of moral values and duties. Beckwith sees that on Mormonism, if God's decrees or deeds are good, "they are only good because they are consistent with an unchanging moral law that exists apart from him" (Beckwith 2002:226).

Second, Beckwith defines moral laws as "rules that one is obligated to obey" (Beckwith 2002:228). One's obligation to a set of rules "arises when the statutes are the result of the deliberation of a legitimate sovereign". In traditional Mormon thought, God himself had a father, who had a father, and so on *ad infinitum*. Mormon theology, Beckwith opines, "implies that the God over this world is a contingent being in an infinite lineage of gods" (p. 224). Beckwith argues that "an infinite regress of sovereigns would mean that no sovereign in the series would ever be the sufficient condition for the authority passed on to the sovereign who follows him" (p. 229). In fact, Beckwith argues, "If there exists an eternally existing sovereign who is the source of the moral law and who has the authority to issue

moral commands based on that law, the LDS worldview would be falsified". This result obtains because the metaphysics behind the Mormon worldview does not have an ultimate being who grounds moral laws. Were such a being to exist, Beckwith reasons, the Mormon worldview would be falsified.

6.2.4 Alternative avenues for objective moral values and duties

Beckwith's chapter also addressed four possible avenues from the standpoint of an LDS worldview one may pursue as an attempt to ground objective moral laws. First, Beckwith deals with a stream of thought that attempts to identify moral laws as "free-floating, Platonic-like forms that are in no mind whatsoever" (Beckwith 2002:230). This is problematic to the LDS worldview on several fronts. First, as I've argued in previous chapters, there are good reasons to reject the Platonic view of morality. Beckwith highlights three reasons to reject such a view from Paul Copan's book *True for you but not true for me*. First, Copan argues that the view that moral goodness is grounded in an abstract object or form of the good does not adequately explain the guilt or shame one feels when violating the moral law (Copan 1998:60-61). Second, our obligations are toward persons, not to a free-floating principle. It does not make sense to speak of obligations to obey a law for its own sake. It does make sense to speak of obeying laws which are bound up with a person, as in Christian theism (Beckwith 2002:230). Third, Copan argues Platonism implies that moral values have "no purposing agent or mind behind them". There is no obvious connection between the principles and our apprehending and enjoining them.

Beckwith also advances an even more serious critique of LDS Platonic morality. He argues that even if one had good reasons to locate the grounding for morality in platonic ideas, LDS materialist metaphysics are at odds with such realities. Because materialism appears to be central to the Mormon worldview, and because Platonic ideas are abstract objects and abstract objects are immaterial, the

Mormon worldview does not appear to be able to suppose both the existence of Platonic ideas and a materialist worldview consistently (Beckwith 2002:231).

Still worse, even if LDS theism could allow for abstract objects to exist, the divine conceptualist and absolute creationist options do not seem to be available the LDS theologian. The absolute creationist supposes that abstract objects, while possibly eternal and necessary, are created by God and so dependent on him (Craig 2017:121), and the divine conceptualist holds that abstract objects are mental objects in God's mind (p. 165). The problem for LDS theism is, as I covered in section 5.5, the God of LDS theology is bound by eternal laws that are external to him. For the LDS worldview, abstract objects, if they exist at all, are not dependent on God and so must exist outside of God's mind or creative work. Thus, supposing a platonic grounding of morality, while not necessarily a threat to the moral argument for God's existence on Christian theism, does seem to pose a major problem for the argument from within an LDS worldview.

After demonstrating the incompatibility of the Platonist option, Beckwith addresses three remaining avenues to ground objective morality. The second option he examines is known as the social contract theory. The real problem with this alternative is that in the end, Beckwith sees, the social contract theory denies moral realism, which is essential to the LDS worldview (Craig 2017:237). Still worse, the social contract theory does not provide an adequate explanation as to how a hypothetical contract could produce exalted and glorified beings.

A third possible alternative Beckwith considers is Aristotelian virtue ethics. Beckwith argues that Aristotle's ethics only make sense within a worldview where there is a "first cause" who gives entities their "final cause" (Craig 2017:238). If, as it appears to be the case in the traditional LDS worldview, there is no ultimate purposer behind the law, then the Aristotelian option becomes incoherent.

The fourth alternative assessed is considering moral properties to be emergent properties. This is the view that "moral properties emerge and supervene natural (or material) entities" (Craig 2017:238). This position may suffice for a

naturalist who does not believe in moral realism. However, for an LDS theologian or a naturalist who does affirm moral realism, considering morals to be emergent properties is a dead end (p. 230). As J.L. Mackie understood, moral properties being both objective and emergent "would be a continuing miracle" (Mackie 1982:118).

6.2.5 Beckwith responds to Ostler's criticisms

In his chapter, Beckwith also takes the opportunity to respond to Ostler's earlier criticisms. Ostler complained that grounding goodness in God's nature is arbitrary because if God's nature had been different, then so would God's will and commands have been. Beckwith points out that Mormonism is not in a better situation (Beckwith 2002:234). Ostler could raise the same objection of arbitrariness to wherever his Mormon God obtained moral goodness. One does not avoid the charge of arbitrariness simply by pointing to a different source of moral goodness. On Mormonism, had the eternal law been different, our moral values and duties would have also been different. To parody Ostler's argument, one could argue that had the eternal law been necessarily antagonistic to Jews, it may have been the case that our "entire moral duty consists in murdering six million Jews" (Ostler 1996:125).

Ostler had also complained that if God is necessarily good, then he is not free to make wrong decisions and thus, he is not a moral agent. Beckwith responds first by suggesting that Ostler's view, while preserving God's freedom, entails that God might choose (or has chosen) to do evil (Beckwith 2002:235). Secondly, as finite beings who are not necessarily good, we have a duty to obey the moral law. God, who is necessarily good, does not need laws to govern his behaviour in order to evaluate his goodness. God, strictly speaking, has no duties to fulfil or laws to obey. While obedience to objective moral values and duties may be a great-making property among humans, that property is mutually exclusive with the greater property of being the standard for objective moral values and duties. Beckwith

reminds us that on the classical conception of God, “God has the greatest possible array of compossible great-making properties, not that he has all great-making properties” (p. 236).

6.2.6 Summary of Beckwith’s argument

We can summarize Beckwith’s argument as follows:

1. The moral argument for God’s existence makes a case for moral realism wherein objective moral values and duties are grounded in God’s nature.
2. Objective moral values and duties cannot be grounded in the nature of the God of Mormon theism.
3. Therefore, the God of Mormon theism cannot be the God to whom the moral argument for the existence of God points.

The heart of the argument is found in premise two. Beckwith has argued that since the Mormon God is himself not a necessary being, and since the God of LDS theology is himself subject to eternal moral laws, he cannot be the ultimate grounding for objective moral values and duties. As Sterling McMurrin has noted, Mormon theology does not suppose absolutism when it comes to the nature of God, but it affirms absolutism when it comes to moral values (McMurrin 1965:2). On Mormon thought, if God had failed to become a God, the moral law would still have been the moral law (Beckwith 2002:226).

Still further, Beckwith suggested that Mormonism would be falsified “If there exists an eternally existing sovereign who is the source of the moral law and who has the authority to issue moral commands based on that law” (Beckwith 2002:229). The traditional Mormon worldview does not have an ultimate being who grounds moral laws and so, were such a being to exist, Beckwith reasons, the Mormon worldview would be falsified. This claim can be put into logical form as follows:

1. If God did not exist, objective moral values and duties would not exist.
2. Objective moral values and duties do exist.

3. Therefore, God exists.
4. God is the grounding for objective moral values and duties.
5. If God is the God of Mormonism, then the God of Mormonism is the grounding for objective moral values and duties.
6. The God of Mormonism is not the grounding for objective moral values and duties.
7. Therefore, God is not the God of Mormonism.

Premise 1 and 2 have been defended at length previously. Premise 3 follows logically, via modus tollens, from premise 1 and 2. Premise 4 follows logically from 1, 2, and 3. Premise 5 is a summary of Beckwith's ideas and is defended above. The conclusion (6) follows necessarily. Based on this argument, Beckwith concludes his chapter with a plea that LDS members allow their beliefs about objective morality values and duties to lead them to "embrace a view of God that can adequately ground those values" (Beckwith 2002:241). If the Mormon God is thought of in the traditional sense, I believe Beckwith's argument is both valid and sound.

It seems to me that the traditional LDS view finds itself very vulnerable to Socrates' criticism discussed in his dialogue with Euthyphro. Euthyphro wanted to connect morality with the will of the gods, to which Socrates asks that vexing question, "Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?" (Plato 1966:1:10a). The traditional LDS answer seems to be to embrace the former option. Morality is not ultimately grounded in God's nature, but God commands what is good after aligning his will to the good. God's commands may be good, but not just because he commands it, but because he learned eternal laws and has become a proficient commander of good things, much the same way a human might learn the good and become a proficient commander of good things. Thus, the moral argument for God's existence does not offer proof for the God of traditional LDS theism any more than it offers proof for Euthyphro's gods. In what follows, I will examine LDS philosopher Blake Ostler's critique of Beckwith's view.

6.3 Introduction to Blake Ostler's critique

In 2001, Blake Ostler published his first book in a series titled "Exploring Mormon Thought". One of the aims of this project is to add to a "dialogue regarding Mormonism as it relates to traditional theology" (Ostler 2001:xi). His second volume, published in 2006, provided Ostler the opportunity to offer an extended critique of Beckwith's argument presented above as found in his 2002 chapter in *The New Mormon Challenge*. Volume three, published in 2008, contains Ostler's grounds for arguing for the nature of God that he uses in his defence against Beckwith's critique. In what follows, focused attention will be given to Ostler's critique of Beckwith's argument and his interpretation of Joseph Smith's writings that he uses to support his metaphysical views.

A preliminary critique of Ostler's is that he finds Christian views of human free will and divine sovereignty to be at odds with real moral decision making. The focus of this work does not permit me to offer a detailed assessment of Ostler's critique of Beckwith specifically and other theologians more generally in this regard, though I do not agree with Ostler's assessment that a truly loving relationship that includes dialogue requires God's not having foreknowledge and not being omnipotent (Ostler 2006:63).

More germane to the discussion of God and morality, Ostler appears to understand the problem Beckwith raises. A human may issue a command, and that command is only good insofar as the command is in harmony with moral obligations that exist independent of the human. So Ostler understands Beckwith to argue that on the LDS worldview, God's decrees, if they are good, are good only in virtue of their being consistent with moral law that exists independent of God (Ostler 2006:78). Against Beckwith's argument Ostler argues: 1) Beckwith's argument is *necessarily* false because he takes all moral laws to be logically necessary; 2) If God is "necessarily good", then God is an amoral being in whom we cannot repose interpersonal trust, and 3) Beckwith's view of the LDS God is not necessarily the LDS position (p. 78).

6.3.1 Ostler's critique of Beckwith's argument

Ostler argues that Beckwith's position is necessarily unsound. Ostler finds the supposition that God is a necessary being "dubious at best" (Ostler 2006:81). He claims that God, as conceived in the conventional tradition, "does not exist in those possible worlds where there are vast amounts of unjustified evils". Ostler reasons that in those worlds God does not exist, but the necessary moral laws still obtain. I find this first objection wrongheaded for two reasons. First, it seems Ostler misses what Christians in the "conventional tradition" mean when we say that God is a necessary being. We mean that God is the grounding, not simply for morality, but for everything else that exists. On traditional Christianity, if there is no God, then nothing exists (Baggett and Walls 2016:78). There simply are no possible worlds where God does not exist and vast amounts of unjustified evil exist. Without God, nothing exists at all. Secondly, when philosophers call objective morality necessary, they need not mean that objective morality exists independent of God. If morality finds its grounding in God, and God exists necessarily, then morality may exist necessarily. Yet, if God did not exist (as per impossible), morality would fail to exist as well, as morality is dependent on God for its ontic status.

Ostler argues that moral goodness must be independent of God's existence. He bases this argument on his intuitional dissatisfaction of the consequence of morality being grounded in God. He is not at ease with the notion that if God did not exist, and if morality is dependent on God, then no one could be morally good or bad (Ostler 2006:81). To this objection, I simply agree with this intuition. It seems similar to what philosophers Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Ruse, and Rosenberg have observed. If God is dead, then we are free to make up our own rules; all things are permitted. As I and these philosophers have argued, I don't see any reason to think that in the absence of God, morality is objective. Ostler believes this to point to morality's existence independent of God; I see this instead as strong evidence of morality's deep dependence on God.

Ostler attempts to salvage this intuition toward morality's independence from God with the use of examples. He argues that the proposition "It is morally wrong to torture little babies" is analytically true and does not depend on God's nature (Ostler 2006:82,85). He reasons this on the basis that "what we mean by 'torture' is 'a morally wrong action'" (p. 82). He also supposes that things like generosity and loving kindness have moral value even if God does not exist (p. 84). These examples do not salvage his view that morality is independent on God.

First, he seems to fail to appreciate the difference between moral epistemology and moral ontology. One can believe an act to be immoral even if it is not. Thus, something can have moral value to me subjectively while having no objective truth value. Even if there were no objective moral values and duties, one could still use the word "torture", but it would not imply that what is called torture actually transgresses any objective moral values. Second, his example fails to appreciate the thrust of the moral argument. The argument is simply that if God does not exist, then there are no objective moral truths. As has been argued previously, without God, there does not seem to be another foundation for objective moral values and duties.

In Ostler's second major critique of Beckwith, he relies on Guleserian's 2001 article, "Can God be Trusted". Ostler argues that Beckwith's God cannot be a morally perfect being because the God of traditional Christianity "is not free to do what is wrong and so is not free in a morally significant sense" (Ostler 2006:86). Ostler argues for a view of a God who could do something evil and that without that possibility, we cannot genuinely trust God. Trust, Ostler believes, implies that the trusted person can act contrary to the trust (p. 87). This follows Guleserian's point, "that *x* trusts *y* to do A entails that *x* assumes that *y* is free with respect to doing A" (Guleserian 2001:297). He concludes that to trust God, we must also believe that God must be the sort of being that has the power to violate our trust (p. 302).

To highlight his point, Ostler asks us to imagine that we are in a room with another person and that there is a safe with a gun locked away. If I know the code

to the safe, and the other person does not, and if I also know that the other person cannot access the gun without the code, Ostler wonders if it is proper to say that I trust the other person not to shoot me, since in the example the other person was not able to do so. Similarly, one might wonder, “Can I trust a person in a vegetative state not to attack me?” It does not seem that *trust* is the right word, since the comatose individual is incapable of launching an attacking on another person. Ostler believes considerations like these should lead us to conclude that God must be able to do evil in order for humans properly to be able to trust God. If God can do evil, then it appears morality would have to be something outside of God’s nature. For reasons given below, one need not follow Ostler’s thought process.

When traditional Christians speak of trusting God, they mean more than simply believing that he will not break his promise. It seems to me that the situation humans are in is more akin to what follows. Suppose Sally is wealthy and generous, but she is unknown to Mark. She intends on enriching Mark and is thusly capable. Sally contacts Mark and explains that she’d like to give to him 100 billion dollars. All he has to do for Sally to give him the money is to sell his house and car and give her the proceeds of those sales, along with his life savings. If he follows through with her request, he will be extraordinarily wealthy. Supposing that it is not possible for Mark to sell everything and not obtain the gift, any doubts he has are not dependent on Sally’s capacity to fail, but in his attributing to her the possibility of failure. From this insight, we can see that person *x* can put trust in a morally perfect being to be moral in those cases in which person *x* is unsure the being is, in fact, morally perfect, or when person *x* is tempted to doubt the moral goodness of the morally perfect being’s ways or will. The higher the stakes, the more trust a person needs. In placing one’s trust in God, a person is placing his or her eternity in God’s hands, trusting God to forgive sins as he said he would. The stakes are high because trusting God is the necessary and sufficient condition for entering into a relationship with God wherein he will forgive a person’s sins and grant that person eternal life in his presence.

Looking back to Ostler's gun and safe analogy, a better use of the analogy could be supposing *person x* is in the room with person *y,* and that only person *x* knows the code to the safe containing the weapon. Person *x* asks the other person to stay with him in the room and he promises not to shoot the other person. It will take trust for person *y* to stay in that room with person *x*. Even if person *x* is God and he promises not to unlock the safe and shoot person *y*, it will take trust on person *y*'s part to believe that God will be faithful to his promise. The higher the stakes, the more trust is required, even on a "sure" thing. With this line of thought, I disagree with Ostler that God's ability to violate our trust "is essential to our ability to trust and have faith him God" (Ostler 2006:89).

6.3.2 Ostler's divine metaphysics

Perhaps Ostler's most promising critique of Beckwith's argument is his objection that Beckwith "presupposes that there was a time before which God was actually a God" in LDS theology (Ostler 2006:90). Ostler presents several distinct metaphysical views of God in LDS thought. The first is the traditional view discussed already in which "God became 'God' at some first moment through obedience to moral principles that were given by a prior god, the Father's Father" (p. 91). The second view is what we've called kingship monotheism or monarchotheism in which there is an "Eternal God of all other gods". It seems clear to me that the first view, which Ostler identifies as the LDS theism critiqued by Beckwith, is not capable of providing the necessary grounding for objective moral values and duties. Ostler briefly attempts to save this view by asking us to imagine it as an "eternal chain of gods" who "eternally function as the ultimate" moral authority. However, this seems to suffer from all the problems associated with an infinite regress. If I ask Elijah for $5, and he tells me he'd be glad to give me the money but that he needs to get $5 from Asher first, and Asher says he'll give the money to Elijah as soon as he gets $5 from Carrie … if we suppose this chain extends on into infinity, I will never get the $5 because each person must get it from another person, and there is no starting point. Unless someone on the chain already

has the $5 to give, I will never get the money. Similarly, if there is no starting point for objective moral values and duties, then God never has the goods to deliver in the first place.

For Ostler, this is a bit of a moot point because he is convinced that the monarchotheist view is more akin to what an LDS person should believe. He defends the second view in which the head God (the Monarch) leads all other subordinate gods (Ostler 2006:442). Ostler spends considerable time seeking to harmonize this second viewpoint with Joseph Smith's teaching found in the King Follett discourse and the Sermon on the Grove. These two sermons, as I've identified previously, put forth Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God.

6.4 Introduction to critique of Ostler

In what follows, two main points will be advanced against Ostler's attempt to salvage Mormonism from the moral argument for God's existence. First it will be argued that his reading and interpretation of Joseph Smith's King Follett discourse and the "Sermon on the Grove" are implausible and certainly not necessary. Second I will argue that even if Ostler has the correct interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God, kingship monotheism as he advances it does nothing to rescue Mormonism from the Moral argument for God's existence.

6.4.1 Introduction to Ostler's approach to Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God

In my treatment on Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God, I noted that traditional LDS theologians have understood Joseph Smith to teach that God became God at some moment in the past and was exalted to his present status, due to his obedience to eternal laws, by some other being. This interpretation, as Beckwith has argued, does not appear to be compossible with the

moral argument for God's existence. Ostler attempts to salvage Mormonism from the moral argument by taking key passages from Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God and interpreting them to mean that God is actually eternal and has been God all along. While he makes several attempts to explain passages as they stand, his primary strategy upon which he bases his interpretation is to argue for a novel revision of Joseph Smith's statements. Ostler does not always accept the teachings of Joseph Smith as published by the LDS Church and argues for his own revision. In what follows directly, I shall present Ostler's interpretation and revisionist reconstructions of the King Follett discourse and the Sermon on the Grove, each of which will be followed by a critique of his revision.

6.4.2 Ostler's interpretation of the King Follett discourse

Ostler does not believe a beginningless God is at odds with the King Follett discourse. Ostler instead believes Joseph Smith's teachings support the position that:

> There was an interval of time from T2 through T3 during which the Father was mortal and not fully divine, but the Father was fully divine eternally prior to T2 and forever after T3. (Ostler 2006:93)

This view, Ostler maintains, is both "consistent with Lorenzo Snow's aphorism: 'As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become" and with Smith's teaching found in the King Follett discourse.

Ostler begins his quest to reinterpret the King Follett discourse by noting that Smith taught that God is eternal in 1840. Smith preached a sermon on February 5, 1840, in which he taught, "I believe that God is eternal. That he had no beginning, and can have no end. Eternity means that which is without beginning or end" (Ostler 2006: 433). Ostler admits that this seems to contradict what Smith says in the King Follett discourse in which he claims, "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea". Much of what Ostler has to say following this apparent contradiction is done in service to his goal to rescue the King

Follett discourse from its traditional LDS interpretation by claiming Smith must not be thinking God first became fully God at some time in the past in light of Scripture and Smith's earlier statements. While Ostler's specific revisions will be engaged later, it is worth noting that in the February 5, 1840 sermon Ostler references, Smith does not merely claim that God is eternal, but also that souls in general are eternal and have no beginning. Thus, the claim Smith makes is not to highlight some feature of God in distinction to human existence; rather, he is claiming that the "soul of man" is as eternal as God's is (Ehat and Cook 1980:33). Mathew Davis, the author of the February 5th recollection of Smith's sermon, understood Smith's point to be that neither God nor the human soul had a beginning, and they will not have an end. Thus, rather than setting up a seeming contradiction that needs to be resolved, the 1840 sermon supports the traditional interpretation of Smith's mature teaching in which God is thought to have eternally existed but was exalted at some point and now has a divine existence. It appears that Smith believed that humans share that same trajectory, at least potentially. It is apparent that Ostler is mistaken about the conflict between Smith's 1840 sermon and his mature teaching on God. Having assessed this preliminary objection, we now turn to Ostler's specific interpretations and revisions of Smith's King Follett discourse.

Ostler admits that there are key passages in the King Follett discourse that can be interpreted to support the traditional LDS notion (Ostler 2006:438) that "there was a time T2 at which the Father first became fully divine, but that he was not fully divine prior to T2; however the Father has always existed without beginning and will always exist without end" (Ostler 2006:435). Indeed, Ostler maintains that:

> Until recently almost all Mormons believed that Joseph Smith taught that God progressed to become fully divine from a lower state of non-divinity. Thus, it was believed that God the Father became God; before that, he was something less than God. During the eternal time period before which he was "God," or fully divine, he worshipped and was subject to another God, who was more ultimate than he was. (Ostler 2008:17)

Ostler however, is not convinced that this is the correct view, and he argues instead that the Father was fully divine before becoming mortal.

In the King Follett Discourse, Smith preached,

> It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another, and that he was once a man like us; yea, that God himself, the Father of us all, dwelt on an earth, the same as Jesus Christ himself did; and I will show it from the Bible … The Scriptures inform us that Jesus said, As the Father hath power in Himself, even so hath the Son power – to do what? Why, what the Father did. The answer is obvious – in a manner to lay down His body and take it up again. (Ostler 2006:438)

Ostler claims that "it is uniformly taught in Mormon scripture and by Joseph Smith that Christ was a fully divine person prior to mortality," and thus this quote from Smith, which takes as its base text John 5:19, supports the view that the Father was fully divine prior to mortality (Ostler 2006:438). He claims that "the Father's mortal experience was like Christ's, and thus it is more consistent to interpret Joseph Smith to assert that the Father, like Christ, was divine before his mortal sojourn…". This interpretation seems far from secure.

First, it seems to me that Ostler is wrong with his interpretation. Smith is claiming that there is something Jesus has in common with the Father, not something the Father has in common with the Son. He is pointing out specifically that just as the Father had the power to lay down his body and take it up again, so the Son has the power to lay down his body and take it up again. This comparison says nothing of the ontological status of the person who precedes the mortal life. For example, Mikie Mahtook was an outfielder for the Detroit tigers in 2017. After falling into a batting slump, he was demoted to the Tigers AAA ball club. In 2018, he began the season with the Major League Detroit Tigers again. I can imagine an interview with Mikie Mahtook in which he is asked what gave him the endurance to stick with baseball and get back to the majors. I could see him saying, "Well, you know, I saw what Tim Tebow did to advance through the single and double A farm clubs he's played for thus far, and I did the same thing. I saw that Tim worked hard and earned his spot at the next level, and I decided that what I saw Tim doing I would do as well". In this imagined scenario, Mikie says he did just what Tim did before him, advancing in the ranks to the next level, yet Mikie has a previous status

as a Major Leaguer and Tim does not. Mikie's claim to follow Tim's example does not imply a previous status as a major leaguer for Tim Tebow. In the same way, Jesus's claim to follow the Father's example does not imply the Father was fully divine before his mortal sojourn, even if Jesus was fully divine before his mortal existence.

Secondly, Ostler's interpretation of this passage from the King Follett discourse based on John 5:19, if correct, disproves his main point. While it may have been uniformly taught in Mormon scripture and by Joseph Smith that Christ was a fully divine person prior to mortality, it is also taught that there was a time when Jesus was exalted. That is, Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of God in the pre-existence and progressed to divinity. Speaking of Jesus Christ, LDS Apostle Bruce McConkie reminds us that "by obedience and devotion to the truth he attained that pinnacle of intelligence which ranked him as a God, as the Lord Omnipotent, while yet in his pre-existent state" (McConkie 1966:129). In "Lecture Fifth" of the *Lectures on Faith,* Joseph Smith teaches that Jesus, having overcome, "received a fullness of the glory of the Father" (*Smith* 1985:60). Later, in "Lecture Seventh," of the *Lectures on Faith*, Smith points out that in his theology, Jesus Christ is the prototype of a saved and glorified person. He is the example for us to follow, a person who, through faith, "has become perfect enough to lay hold upon eternal life" (p. 75). There was a time, call it time *T*, when Jesus was not fully divine. Then at *T*1 he was exalted, then at *T*2 he was mortal, and then at *T*3 he was full of glory once more. If Ostler is correct in his interpretation, and Jesus follows the Father's example, that would imply God the Father was once a mere organized being, who was later exalted due to his faith and obedience, after which he became mortal and then, finally, was glorified. Thus, if Ostler is correct, God the Father still has not been God from all eternity. Ostler's treatment of the passage from the King Follett discourse does not overturn the traditional LDS understanding of God as an exalted being who has not been exalted from eternity past.

Ostler points to another passage in the King Follett discourse that is often seen as supportive to the traditional LDS interpretation of God's nature. Smith preached,

> Here then is eternal life – to know the only wise and true God; and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you, namely by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one. (Ostler 2006:439)

This passage speaks of Gods learning how to be Gods, and so appears supportive of the traditional LDS view. Ostler claims it only appears as such if one assumes "that those engaged in the process of learning to be gods cannot already be gods". Ostler points out that traditional LDS thinking interprets this passage as claiming that persons "learn how to advance to become Gods by becoming a 'god' at some first time T1 by advancing from one capacity to another until they reach the status of gods" (Ostler 2006:440). Ostler, however, claims that this passage should be taken to mean that "God the Father has been in a process of eternal progression from one exaltation to another for all eternity, and humans can commence to progress toward godhood by engaging in the same activity of progression" (p. 440).

The major obstacle for Ostler's interpretation, which he does not address, is that this passage is aimed at communicating to mortal humans, who have (presumably) never been gods, how we may progress to "be Gods". We, who at present have never been fully divine, may become so by following the same process "as all the Gods have done before" us. Smith seems to intend for merely mortal humans to take as our model for exaltation other beings who have been similarly situated who have learned little by little how to progress from a small capacity to a great one. The God of LDS theology does not appear to be exempted from this mimicable process.

Ostler highlights a third passage that seems well-suited for the traditional interpretation, but which he will argue is actually better situated in his interpretive

frame in which God was eternally fully divine prior to his mortal sojourn. In the official LDS version of the King Follett discourse, Joseph Smith states:

> …it is necessary we should understand the character and being of God and how He came to be so; for I am going to tell you how God came to be God. We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea, and take away the veil, so that you may see. (Smith 1980:6:305; c.f. Ostler 2006:441)

In this passage Smith reportedly refutes the idea that God the Father "has always been God or always had divine status" (Ostler 2006:441).

Ostler's strategy with this text is to argue for a revision of the text that will allow for a different interpretation. Ostler argues that the above statement, while supported by Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff's recollection of the sermon, is not in harmony with Thomas Bullock's report of the discourse (Ostler 2006:441).. Ostler also points out that that William Clayton omits the statement "about a refutation altogether". However, one should accept the text as the LDS Church publishes for four reasons.

First, for some inexplicable reason, Ostler neglects to convey that William Clayton's report, while not recording the exact phrase as the others, does tell us that Smith claimed to "tell you how God came to be God". While he does not reproduce the exact phrase as Willard Richards and Wilford Woodruff, he does produce the same doctrine.

Secondly, Ostler fails to mention other reports of the sermon. Samuel W. Richards's record is brief, but remarkably records the sentence in question. It states, "to have eternal life, God: a man like one of us, even like Adam. Not God from all Eternity" (Ehat and Cook 1980:361).

Thirdly, Bullock's account is not as out of harmony with Richard's and Woodruff's account as Ostler would like us to believe. Bullock's report records, "I am going to tell you what sort of a being of God. for he was God from the begin of all Eternity & if I do not refute it..". (Ehat and Cook 1980:350). Ostler claims

Bullock's report states that Smith does not intend to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity. However, at best, Bullock's report is ambiguous, as Smith is reported to have said only, "if I do not refute it". He does not say "I do not refute it". Rather, it could easily be understood as shorthand for something like, "see if I do not refute it". In fact, Bullock notes that just after this statement, Smith went on to argue that "God himself the father of us all dwelt on a Earth same as Js. himself did…" (p. 350). This seems to refute the idea that God has been God from all eternity in that there is at least that time God dwelt on an Earth, and during that time God was not fully divine.

Bullock's notes go on to argue from this point that humans have this capacity to dwell on an Earth and be exalted to divine status as well, claiming "you have got to learn how to be a God yourself & be K. & Priest to God same as all have done by going from a small capy to anr. from grace to grace until the resn. & sit in everlasting power as they who have gone before & God…". The theology Bullock records is entirely in line with that which was reported by Richards, Woodruff and Clayton. Ostler's interpretation of Bullock's report is out of line with not only other reports of the same sermon from others who were there, but with Bullock's own report.

As further evidence for Bullock's substantial harmony with the official LDS report, it is worth noting that Bullock was responsible for preparing the minutes of the conference based on his and William Clayton's notes (Barney 1997:107). These minutes were then published by the LDS Church in *Times and Seasons*. It seems odd that Ostler relies on Bullock's report, but not the official minutes he produced. Bullock's minutes bear witness that Smith claimed, "We have imagined that God was God from all eternity", but that it is necessary to "understand the character and being of God, for I am going to tell you how God came to be God". The preponderance of the reporting seems to point in one direction, namely, the traditional interpretation. It is also telling that Stan Larson's newly amalgamated text of the King Follett discourse is in harmony with the traditional LDS published version of the discourse. It reads, "For we have imagined that God was God from the

beginning of all eternity. I will refute that idea and take away the veil so you may see" (Larson 1978:201; cf. Roberts 1903:227).

As a final consideration regarding the view of God found in the King Follett discourse, Ostler points to Smith's reconstruction of Genesis 1:1 as proof of his monarchotheistic leanings. He claims that Smith's revision of Genesis 1:1 "entailed that there is a single God who is the head of all other gods". As has been argued elsewhere, Smith used Hebrew "as he chose, as an artist…in accordance with his taste, according to the effect he wanted to produce, as a foundation for the theological innovations" (Zucker 1968:53). In Kevin Barney's study of Smith's emendation of the Hebrew behind Genesis 1:1, he admits that it is difficult to piece together Smith's exact logic in his reconstruction. Rather than attempting to follow Smith's interpretation of the text of Genesis 1:1, Barney concludes that it seems more fruitful to interpret Smith as conjecturing that the original Hebrew of Genesis 1:1 had been altered and that his reading was the original (Barney 1997:128). Barney claims that the basic thrust of Smith's argument is not as uncertain. Joseph Smith appears to make the claim that Genesis 1:1 is describing the BAbr 3:23 council in which God called other gods to council in order to create our world. This certainly does not necessitate God's being fully divine from all eternity. Ostler contends Smith "believed that the text of Genesis 1:1 had been corrupted and that it originally indicated that the head God brought forth the other gods in a council of gods" (Ostler 2006:442). I will revisit this topic in the next section as I review Ostler's claim regarding Smith's use of Genesis 1:1 in his June 16, 1844 sermon, known as the Sermon in the Grove.

Ostler argues that even if the King Follett discourse does teach that God has not been God from all eternity, still it does not follow that God was not God prior to his mortal life. He argues that it implies merely that at some points in his timeline, he was not fully divine., As we will see when examining Ostler's interpretation of the Sermon in the Grove, this position is not compatible with Joseph Smith's mature teaching on God.

6.4.3 Ostler's interpretation of Smith's Sermon in the Grove

Joseph preached his June 16, 1844 Sermon in the Grove east of the Nauvoo temple (Ehat and Cook 1980:378). He began the sermon by quoting Revelation 1:6, "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and His father" (Ostler 2006:442). The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, first published in 1611 AD, seems to have a bit of an unfortunate translation which may have provided Joseph Smith with an unsound starting point for the interpretation he draws out of the text. The KJV puts "and His father" after "God", which Joseph Smith took to mean the verse was saying that Jesus makes Christians to be kings and priests under God the Father and God the Father's father. The Greek text of the portion of the verse in focus is "τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ". Here we have two personal, singular, and non-proper nouns of the same case connected by "και" where the first, but not the second noun is governed by a definite article. This construction within the New Testament was shown by Granville Sharp in 1798 to always indicate that only one person is in view (Wallace 2013:80). In other words, the grammar of the passage ought to lead one to see "God" and "father" as the same person. Sharp noted that the KJV translators mistranslated several such grammatical occurrences, with Revelation 1:6 being one such passage (p. 80; Wallace 2004). The ambiguity of the KJV translation seems to have been seized upon by Joseph Smith, though most modern translations of the Bible appreciate the syntactical construction that allows for greater clarity with the passage. The ESV translates the verse, "and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father".[21] This translation follows the grammar correctly, linking "θεῷ" and "πατρὶ" while understanding the "τῷ θεῷ" as "a dative of reference or advantage, that is, Christ has made believers to serve as kings and priests in service to his Father, which is to be for his Father's eternal glory and dominion" (Beale 1999:194). This verse is not claiming God the Father had a father, though this appears to be how Smith understands the King James Version's translation. Even if he is mistaken

[21] The NET, NASB, NIV, and NRSV's translation of Rev. 1:6 stand in translational harmony with the ESV with regard to the Greek phrase in question.

about the actual meaning of the verse, Joseph Smith uses the verse as a proof text from which to proclaim "that the Father had a father and that there is another 'Father above the Father of Christ" (Ostler 2006:444). This is harmonious with the traditional LDS interpretation of Smith's mature teaching on God and out of step with Blake Ostler's contention that there is one Most High God who has always been such.

Blake Ostler would rather have us understand Smith's teaching to imply only that "when the Father condescended from a fullness of his divine state to become mortal, he was born into a world and had a father *as a mortal*"(Ostler 2006:444). Ostler begins his defence of this interpretation by noting that Smith continues to stress that Jesus does "precisely" what the Father did before him (p. 445). As we saw above, this strategy fails to suit Ostler's purposes because if the analogy holds, it proves too much. If Jesus can truly follow the Father's example, then the example is that of a person who was birthed by divine parents, became divine, entered into mortality, and exercised power to take his life up again after death. Yet this is exactly the traditional LDS interpretation that Ostler seeks to overturn.

Ostler does not rest his case on that interpretive move alone. He also points out that George Laub's journal notes from this sermon state that "the holy ghost is yet a Spiritual body and waiting to take upon himself a body, as the Savior did or as god did". Ostler concludes from this that "Joseph Smith taught that already divine persons, including the Son and the Holy Ghost, take upon themselves bodies" (Ostler 2006:445). The major problem with this reliance on George Laub's journal is that Ostler's quotation of this portion of the journal is incomplete, and misleadingly so. Laub's sentence continues on where Ostler provides a period. The sentence proceeds as follows: "… as the Savior did or as god did **or the gods before them** …" (Ehat and Cook 1980:382, emphasis added). Laub extends the analogy: "the Scriptures Say those who obey the commandments shall be heirs of god & Joint heirs with of Jesus Christ we then also took bodys to lay them down, to take them up again…" (p. 382). Laub's understanding is that we do just what Jesus did, which is just what the Father did before him. The Father, the Son, and we humans are but

three links in an eternal chain of gods. Clearly, contra Ostler's contention, Laub's journal provides deeper evidence that Smith's thinking about God is much more akin to the traditional LDS interpretation than Ostler's.

It is worth returning briefly to Smith's interpretation of Genesis 1:1. Ostler contends that Smith's understanding of Genesis 1:1 is that a monarchotheistic head god presides over a council of gods (Ostler 2008:20). The point Smith makes in the Sermon in the Grove regarding Genesis 1:1 is that he understands the term "Eloiheam" to be translated "in the plural all the way thro" (Ehat and Cook 1980:379). Rather than there being a stress on a head God who organizes a council, there is instead an insistence that "the heads of the Gods appointed one God for us". Thus, there is a plurality of head Gods, who appoint one God to be the God over us. In a bold claim, Smith proclaims, "Intelligences exist one above anotr. that there is no end to it" (p. 380). Joseph Smith bases his own belief in the plurality of Gods on this "insight" from a "learned Jew" (p. 379). He states, "in the very beginning there is a plurality of Gods—beyond the power of refutation".

The McIntire Minute Book, though brief, shares this understanding of Smith's use of Genesis 1:1 in the Sermon in the Grove. McIntire claims that in this sermon, Smith "proceeded to show the plurality of Gods" with his explanation of the "origanel Hebrew" of Genesis 1:1 (Ehat and Cook 1980:383). McIntire claims that Smith shared with the gathered crowd that "in the Beginning the Head Gods organized the Earth & the heavens…". Again, a witness claims Joseph Smith spoke of the Head Gods, rather than the "head God", as Ostler would have it.

6.4.4 Summary of Ostler's interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God

Ostler's interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching rests on three principal arguments. First, he claimed that Smith's teaching in the King Follett discourse based on John 5:19 implies that the Father was divine prior to becoming mortal. Second, he claimed that Smith's teaching that the Father had a father

should be interpreted as God the Father's father in mortality. Third, Ostler argued Smith's use of Genesis 1:1 shows that Smith believed in a monarch God who rules over a heavenly council of gods. After interacting with these and several other issues Ostler raised, I have shown that none of these interpretive moves is justified by the texts themselves. In fact, the great lesson Smith is stressing is that humans may follow in the example of an eternal chain of exalted beings. God the Father followed his father's example to divinity, Jesus followed God the Father's example, and humans may follow Jesus' example. Humans today simply follow the pattern of the gods before us, as they have done before them, etc., etc., *ad infinitum.* Thus, after critically examining Smith's mature teaching, it looks as though the traditional LDS interpretation of Smith's teaching is correct. In that case, Beckwith's critique stands, and the moral argument for God's existence stands as a solid argument against LDS theism.

6.5 The failure of Ostler's kingship monotheistic rescue attempt

Even if Ostler is right in his interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching on the nature of God, his kingship monotheistic theology does nothing to rescue Mormonism from the moral argument for God's existence. This is because Ostler still envisions moral goodness as existing independent of God. On Ostler's kingship monotheism, even if God has existed from eternity past as the head God, moral laws are co-eternal and exist independent of God.

Ostler contends for a view of moral obligations grounded in "the eternal nature of uncreated realities and our inherent capacities for progression and growth to realize our divine nature" (Ostler 2006:110). His "agape theory" of ethics holds that "moral laws define the conditions that are necessary for the growth and progress of intelligences to partake of the divine nature". His view is that we act such that "each shall have the best life possible within the constraints posed by eternal conditions necessary for mutual self-realization". Humans, on his view, have divine potential and so the good is just "whatever leads to our realization of our

humanity in a fullness of divinity". God's nature is divine, and so, in some sense the good is "defined by the nature of God", but not necessarily so as it is possible for Ostler for God to do something evil (p. 87). For Ostler, the good is "whatever leads to greater love and unity in interpersonal relationships" (p. 111). This is objective, Ostler maintains, because it has an inescapable force and it is the same for every person. What is clear is that its inescapable force and universality are not dependent on God ontologically. Ostler argues, "Love is not a law instituted by God, although it is a law expressive of who and what God is" (p. 114). Further, "there are eternal moral principles which condition even God, and these principles are found in the constraints inherent within intelligences for mutual self-realization as divine persons" (p. 114).

Ostler's "agape theory" points to an eternal law, the "law of love" that sits in judgment over the head God, Gods, and Gods in embryo. He posits an objective law that exists and to which humans and God himself must submit to in order to realize their divine potential. It occurs to me that there are several pitfalls associated with this position.

First, should God fail to abide by the law of love, he would cease to be fully divine. Being fully divine would seem to be a prerequisite for being the head God, and therefore it seems that on Ostler's view, there are possible worlds where the head God is not the head God.

Second, Ostler is still holding onto a view of objective morality that falls prey to the Euthyphro dilemma in the same way the traditional LDS view does. Morality is not ultimately grounded in God's nature, but God commands what is good after aligning his will to the good. God's commands may be good, but only in virtue of his learning the eternal law and commanding that which is in line with that law. Thus, the moral argument for God's existence does not offer proof for Ostler's kingship monotheistic God any more than it offers proof for the traditional LDS view of Gods.

Third, Ostler's agape ethic bears a family resemblance to the atheistic ethics of Sam Harris discussed previously. Harris believed the grounding for human ethics

relates to objective facts about human thriving. For Harris, there are objective facts about what makes a plant thrive, and there are objective facts about what makes humans thrive. Part of thriving, Harris argues, points us to ethical demands. As argued earlier (2.6), this theory of ethics suffers from several problematic features. First, it collapses morality to prudential goods. What is good is only good for a person if thriving is her aim. The theory contains no grounding for a command like, “thou ought to thrive”. Harris seems to take it for granted that a person ought to want that, but I see no moral obligation on Harris’s view to accept that. Secondly, Harris does not seem able to show why humans ought to be primarily concerned with human flourishing rather than dung beetles thriving or interstellar planetary motions thriving.

Fourth, Ostler’s view does not escape the prudential orbit. He gives no grounding for the command, “thou shalt realize your potential”. There may be facts about what will aid one’s quest to greatness, but that does not make one’s actions moral just because they are done in pursuit of that potential. Nor does Ostler offer a moral reason why one should be concerned with reaching one’s potential rather than helping carrots reach their potential. Like Sam Harris, Ostler is left with an “is” but no “ought”. He may describe the human condition, but he has no grounding to prescribe human action. This amounts to a rejection of objective moral values and duties altogether. While he can speak of certain actions being objectively prudentially good, his view does not seem to be able to escape that prudential domain. Morality becomes a means to an end, but not normative. Harris and Ostler both tell us what they believe will aid human flourishing, but they cannot find a moral grounding that obligates us to pursue that flourishing.

Fifth, Ostler’s eternal agape ethic appears arbitrary. Ostler claims that the good is bound up with what is loving. But what if what makes us realize our potential was harming others? Would we not then be obligated in Ostler’s view to do harm? On Ostler’s view, there appears to be no reason to think that love would be the moral good.

Ostler seems to tacitly understand this problem and posits “that the moral law arises only in the context of interpersonal relations” (Ostler 2006:84). Ostler seems to see that only if the fundamental grounding of morality is tied in some way to a loving interpersonal relationship could love be tied non-arbitrarily to objective morality. Yet Ostler does not propose a loving relationship as the grounding of objective values and duties. Rather, it is one’s potential that grounds what one should do, and this potential is led forward by loving action. Thus, at the heart of Ostler’s agape ethic, there is no interpersonal relationship; there is a law, and there seems to be nothing to constrain this law from taking a more nefarious form in which it harms others to reach one’s potential. This is not the case with Christian theism.

The distinctively Christian teaching on divinity is that God has eternally existed as the triune God. God has eternally existed in three persons “who have always existed in a relationship of perfect love with one another” (Baggett 2013:347). Thus, a fifth reason to reject Ostler’s view is that non-Trinitarian worldviews like Mormon theism of any variety do not suppose an eternal God who has always existed in loving interpersonal relations. By their nature, non-trinitarian theistic expressions are at a distinct disadvantage in explaining how the nature of morality could be essentially one of love (Baggett 2013:347).

The moral argument for the existence of God then, if it is sound, would not only fail to support a theism like Ostler commends, but it would also positively rule out such a theistic expression. Ostler’s God is not the full and final grounding for objective moral values and duties as is the God of the moral argument.

6.6 Summary of the critique of Ostler’s monarchotheist views

While the God of traditional Christian theism is compatible with the ontological commitments required by the moral argument for God’s existence, in the previous few sections I’ve shown that the moral argument for God’s existence is not compatible with traditional LDS metaphysical commitments. I’ve also shown that

Ostler's non-traditional view of LDS divinity depends on an interpretation of Joseph Smith's teaching that is neither necessary nor likely to be correct. Finally, I've shown Ostler's kingship monotheism to have serious philosophical problems which should lead one to conclude that it is also not compatible with the God the moral argument commends. Thus, it appears that not only is the moral argument for God's existence a good argument for the God of traditional Christian theism, but that it is also a good argument against the God of LDS theisms.

Chapter Seven: Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This research project can be described as a five-step journey. The first step was taken in chapters two and three as the project laid out a case for the existence of God from the moral argument. Secondly, relevant attributes of the God of traditional Christian theism were articulated. Next, the God of Christian theism was established as compatible with the metaphysical requirements of deity entailed by the moral argument for God's existence. The fourth step, encompassing chapter five, presented several versions of LDS theism. The final step of the journey was taken in chapter six, where the various views of LDS theism were examined in light of the moral argument for God's existence.

This concluding chapter will revisit the reasons why this project was undertaken as well as provide a summary of the results of the project.

7.2 Why this research topic was chosen

In the introduction, several motivating experiences were noted as the impetus for undertaking this project. One set of experiences related to my own philosophical endeavours. As a philosopher, I was impressed by the prospect of the project of ramified natural theology. This prospect has sparked renewed interest in natural theology in my own thinking as well as the research and writing of others. Having researched and written previously on a variety of topics related to LDS theology and having studied and written about morality and natural theology in the past, the present project seemed to be a natural extension of previous research and writing. I've also been impressed with Francis Beckwith's argument against LDS theism on the basis of the moral argument for God's existence and was surprised that LDS author Blake Ostler had written an unanswered response to Beckwith's argument. This led me to believe that there was more work to be done in this field.

Beyond academic interest, my personal experience as a pastor of a traditional Christian church in Utah where the LDS Church is the dominant religious organization was another motivating factor for this research. I believe the outcome of this research may help my own personal witness to LDS members. I am also hopeful that this project will serve to embolden other traditional Christians to interact with LDS academics, especially philosophers.

7.3 Aims of the research

The aims of this project were born out of my motivations for undertaking this study. I sought to respond to Ostler's response to Beckwith, showing that Ostler's critique of Beckwith was neither a necessary nor sufficient response. My aim was also to identify a new application of ramified natural theology: demonstrating that the entailments of the natural theological defence of God's existence from the moral argument are well-suited for traditional Christian theism while also being ill-suited for LDS theisms.

7.4 Research design and methodology

As a guide for this project, I developed a set of research questions. These questions enabled me to pursue the aims of this research in a methodical and logical way. First, I developed the moral argument for God's existence and answered the major objections philosophers have raised against the argument. While developing that argument, I also answered the question, "What metaphysical implications derive from the theistic moral argument?" Next, I explored various LDS theisms, noting their theistic metaphysical commitments. Then I sought to explore which brands of theism—traditional Christianity or some form of LDS theism—carry the necessary metaphysical commitments required by the moral argument for God's existence. In order to accomplish this last task, it was necessary to assess the biblical data regarding God and morality, and then LDS teaching on God.

7.5 Boundaries

This example of ramified natural theology took as its general boundary the moral argument for God's existence. More specifically, this project engaged with LDS philosopher Blake Ostler's critique of Francis Beckwith's argument that LDS doctrine is not compatible with the moral argument for God's existence. The goal of this project was not to assess Joseph Smith as a prophet or to offer other critiques of LDS doctrine or history. The goal was simply to identify LDS theology as it pertains to the metaphysics of God, and then to determine if it was as compatible to the moral argument as was traditional Christian theism.

7.6 The discoveries: What were the findings?

In connection to my research questions, I found first that the moral argument is a valid argument, and that it appears to be sound. Several objections were discussed and overcome in reaching that conclusion. I then drew out several key metaphysical requirements that follow logically from the moral argument. It seems to me that humans must possess a will that is able to obey or disobey moral obligations, and that for moral obligations to exist, there must be some moral lawgiver who is both personal and whose own character is the grounding for moral truths. With these entailments of the moral argument in mind, I first turned to the scriptures of traditional Christian theism to ascertain to what degree traditional Christian theism cohered with the moral argument for God's existence. I found that the biblical data supports real human free will as well as God's personal and moral character, which is thought to form the basis for moral truths.

Next, I turned to LDS theisms. I found, in agreement with Francis Beckwith, that traditional LDS doctrine does not support a personal basis for moral truths, nor is the God of traditional LDS thought capable of being the final grounding for moral truths. While there are some differences between traditional LDS thinking and neo-orthodox LDS theologians regarding deity, those differences do not appear to

remedy the above deficiencies of the LDS God with regard to the moral argument for God's existence. Blake Ostler believes his monarchotheistic LDS theism is better situated to meet the demands of the moral argument, but as chapter six demonstrated, his project failed on two major counts. First, I discovered that his interpretation was not necessary. That is, his interpretation of Joseph Smith's mature teaching upon which he bases his theistic understanding fails on a number of levels. Next, I discovered that his explanation is not sufficient either. Even if his interpretation of Joseph Smith were correct, it does not appear to me that the monarchotheistic LDS perspective can provide the grounds for objective moral values and duties.

While traditional Christian theism has the resources to overcome the Euthyphro dilemma, it appears to me that the same dilemma is devastating to LDS theisms. LDS theisms do not appear to me to be able to find a personal and final grounding for moral truths. My conclusion is that the moral argument for God's existence is both a good argument for traditional Christian theism and, at the same time, a good argument against LDS theism in any of the forms discussed.

7.7 Recommendations

I join Francis Beckwith in calling on LDS members to "embrace a view of God that can adequately ground" objective moral values and duties (Beckwith 2002:241). For the LDS philosopher who is not ready to make that change, I would recommend another project similar to Ostler's but with significant changes. I would recommend distancing oneself from the mature teachings of Joseph Smith in order to develop a different theology of God more akin to the biblical view. It seems to me Ostler's attempt at this fails due to his acceptance of Joseph Smith's mature teaching. It is not clear to me that the LDS member is required to adopt this view, and it may be possible to reject Smith's teaching on God and adopt a view that does not fall prey to the Euthyphro dilemma. It is unclear to me whether this view would be accepted as truly LDS, but it may be more philosophically tenable.

More philosophical and theological effort needs to be devoted to studying the LDS faith. I'm hopeful that this project will open new avenues for future research and interfaith dialogue. I believe ramified natural theology is an important addition to this LDS and Christian dialogue that can help move beyond the typical historical apologetics of both LDS members and evangelical Christians.

7.8 The contribution of this study

This study makes a contribution to the body of knowledge regarding ramified natural theology and the LDS religion. Through a philosophical analysis of the natural theological moral argument for God's existence, this project contrasts the compatibility of traditional Christian and LDS faiths with this argument. The results of this project appear to be useful for ongoing philosophical engagement with LDS philosophers, as well as evangelism efforts to LDS members more broadly. The following are some implications drawn out in this work:

- The moral argument for God's existence is valid.
- The moral argument is robust enough to overcome the main objections raised up against it.
- Traditional Christian faith is compatible with the moral argument.
- LDS belief, both in its traditional form, neo-orthodox expression, and in Blake Ostler's revision of LDS doctrine, is not compatible with the moral argument for God's existence.

7.9 Issues for future research

This study opens up at least three areas of future study for exploration. First, having demonstrated that natural theology can be employed not only as a defence of traditional Christian faith but also as a defeater for LDS belief, it seems to me that a fruitful course of study stemming from this work would be evaluating to what degree other natural theological arguments can serve as defeaters for LDS theism. I

expect that both the ontological argument, the cosmological argument in both its Kalam and Leibnizian form, the teleological argument, the argument from reason, and the argument from consciousness may all provide both support for Christian theism while also serving as a defeater for LDS belief.

Secondly, this project, having highlighted a major philosophical problem with LDS belief, may encourage LDS philosophers to engage with this philosophical issue at greater depth. Perhaps this will yield new thinking with regard to deity among LDS philosophers. This may encourage future continued dialogue for LDS members and other philosophers who engage with this topic.

Thirdly, with regard to the moral argument, it seems to me the weakest point of the moral argument lies with its engagement with abstract objects. I think the moral argument and its relationship with abstract objects could be explored by philosophers at a deeper level.

7.10 Conclusions

The findings of this project showed that the LDS doctrine of God is not compatible with the metaphysical requirements of the moral argument for God's existence. Further, because the moral argument appears to be valid and sound, and because traditional Christian theism appears to be compatible with the entailments of the moral argument for God's existence, the moral argument serves as support for Christian theism while, at the same time, serving as a defeater for LDS theism. My conclusion is that this is the case for traditional LDS theism as well as neo-orthodox and monarchotheistic expressions of LDS theism. This has important philosophical and theological implications, and I'm hopeful that this project will help some LDS thinkers to rationally engage with natural theology and its implications for ontological claims.

Finally, in closing, I am ever so grateful for the thoughtful men and women who have spent enormous time and effort thinking clearly on many of the topics

addressed in this work. Without the work of so many who have engaged with many of these ideas, this work would not be possible. I would be delighted for this work to add one more facet of inquiry into the moral argument and LDS belief.

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